GEFORCE3: WHICH CARD IS BEST? WE TELL YOU ON PAGE 114

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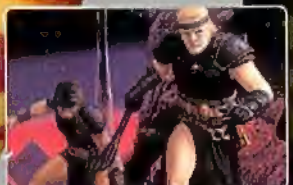

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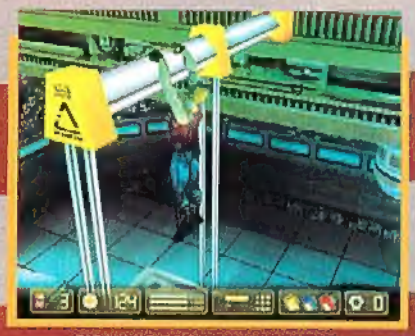

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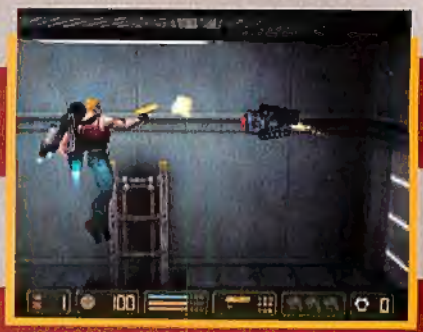

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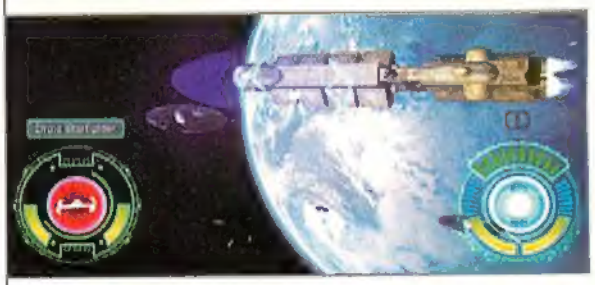

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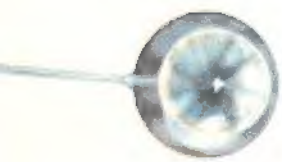

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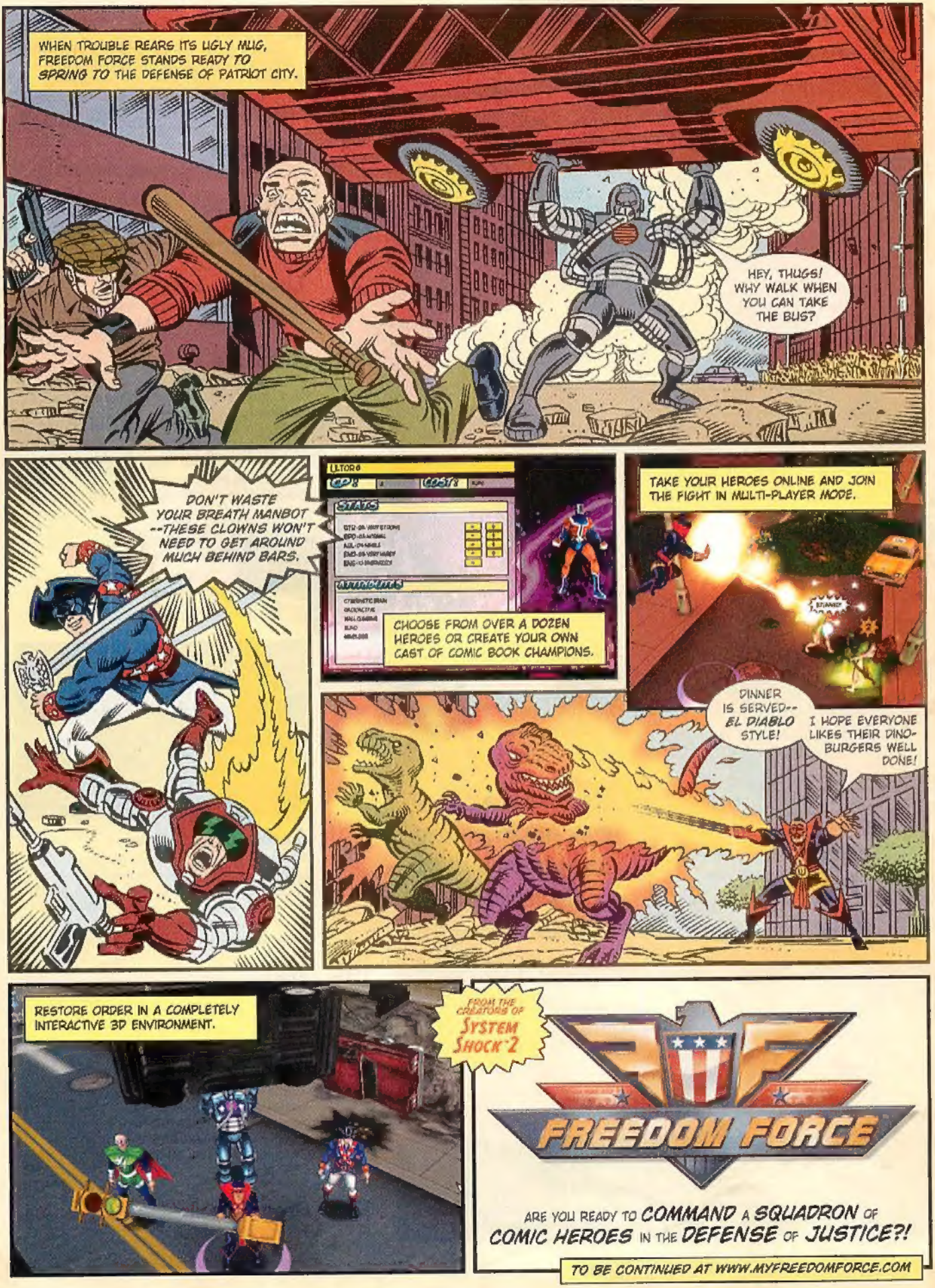
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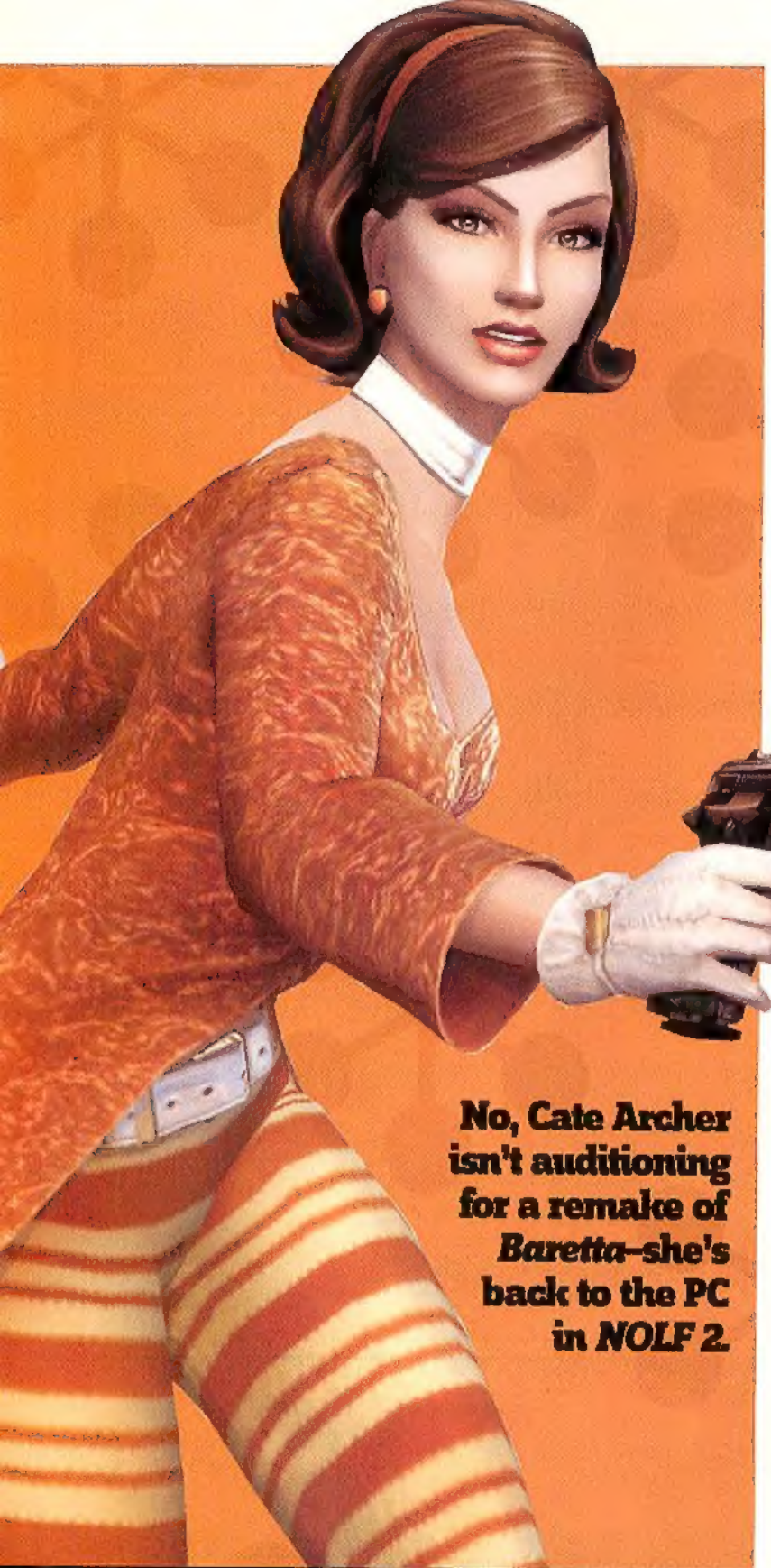

No, Cate Archer isn't auditioning for a remake of *Baretta*–she's back to the PC in *NOLF 2*.

54 COVER STORY
NOLF 2
Wil got hands-on time with the sneakier and sassier Cate Archer of ***No One Lives Forever 2***. He managed to write about it from his traction bed.

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Jeff ruminates on the best games of the year.

15 **Letters**
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24 **Loading...**
Screenshot soup for the soul including eye-popping shots of **Hitman 2** and **Medieval: Total War**.

30 **Read Me**
PC gaming is alive and kicking. Despite a dismal year for the economy, game sales were up again last year (page 39). And the future looks even better, with a stellar list of titles in the pipe (see our Top 10 lineup on page 30). Also be sure to check out our list of the best mods of 2001, Scott McCloud's latest comic, and all the usuals, including Good/Bad/Ugly, 5/10/15, Top 20, and Pipeline.

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69 **Game of the Year**
We sat in a conference room for eight hours. We laughed, we cried, we gave Scooter a melvin. And when it was all over, we left the room with a list of the best games of 2001–and some of the worst. Join us now as we celebrate the winners (and losers) in a year we're ready to put behind us.

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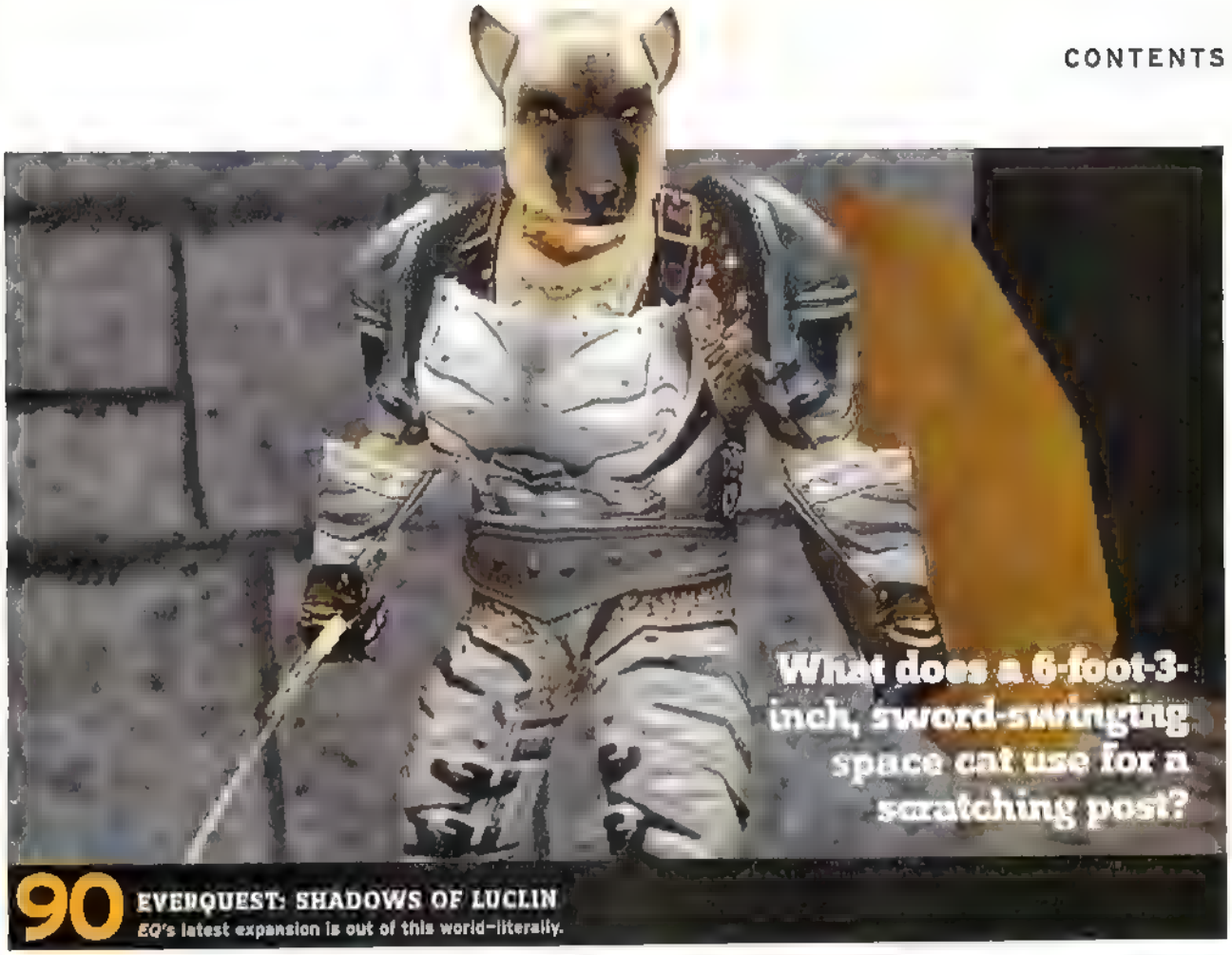
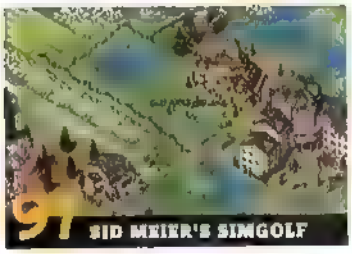
Jeff is beastlord woman–hear him roar.



90 EVERQUEST: SHADOWS OF LUCLIN
EQ's latest expansion is out of this world—literally.

50 MORROWIND



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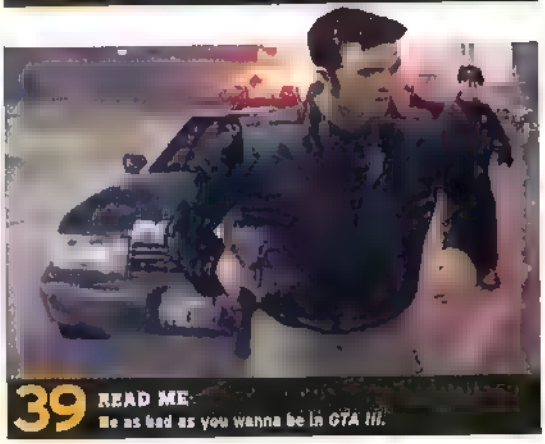

39 READ ME
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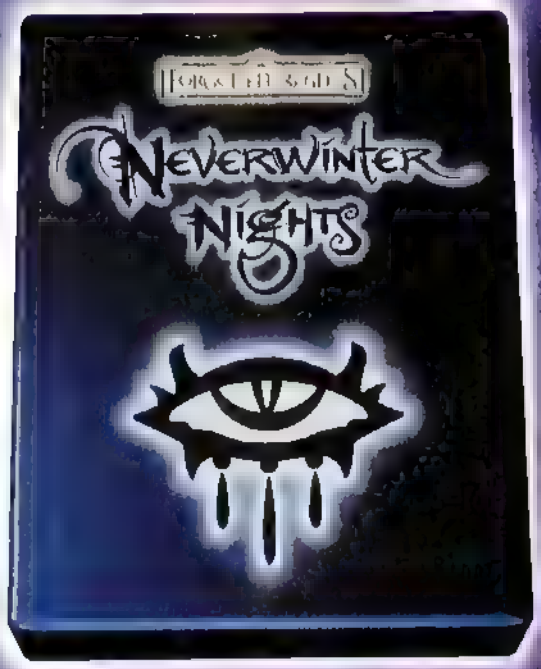

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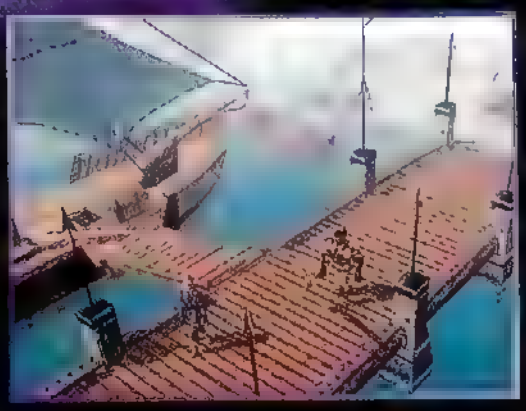
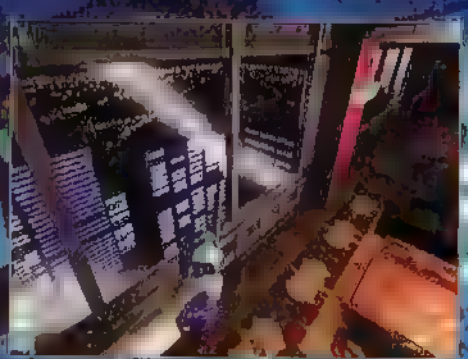


From the Developer of Baldur's Gate, Tales of the Sword Coast, Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn, and Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal.

A million bad guys in the world and I gotta



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CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
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HOW TO CONTACT THE EDITORS
To contact any member of the staff: firstname_lastname@ziffdavis.com
Address nonsubscription-related questions and feedback to: *CGW* Editorial, 50 Beale Street, 12th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94105. Or you may contact us via: CGWletters@ziffdavis.com; phone: (415) 357-4900; or editorial fax: (415) 357-4977. Website: www.computergaming.com

ADVERTISING & SALES DEPARTMENT
Group Publisher **Lee Uniacke**
Group Associate Publisher **Suzanne Reider** suzie@ziffdavis.com (415) 357-4915
Regional Sales Manager/Northwest Territory **Marci Yamaguchi** marciy@ziffdavis.com (415) 357-4944
Account Executive/Northwest Territory **Meighan O'Rourke** meighan_orourke@ziffdavis.com (415) 357-4920
Regional Sales Manager/Bay Area **Ian Sinclair** ian_sinclair@ziffdavis.com (415) 357-4925
Account Executive/Bay Area **Mary Gray** mary_gray@ziffdavis.com (415) 547-8782
Regional Sales Manager/Midwest and East Coast Territory **Marc Callison** marc_callison@ziffdavis.com (630) 382-9034
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Account Executive/Midwest and East Coast Territory **Emily Olman** emily_olman@ziffdavis.com (415) 357-5226
Regional Sales Manager/Southwest Territory **Karen Landon** karen_landon@ziffdavis.com (760) 942-6277
Senior Account Executive/Southwest Territory **Linda Philapil** linda_philapil@ziffdavis.com (415) 547-8781
Senior Marketing Manager and Creative Director **Rey Ledda** rey_ledda@ziffdavis.com (415) 547-8775
Marketing Coordinator **Annie Lipscomb** annie_lipscomb@ziffdavis.com (415) 547-8248
Advertising Coordinator **Tipler Ubbelohde** tipler_ubbelohde@ziffdavis.com (415) 357-4930
Sales Assistant **Kristeen Laut** kristeen_laut@ziffdavis.com (415) 547-8778
Sales Assistant **Cheryl Farrell** cheryl_farrell@ziffdavis.com (415) 547-8783

HOW TO CONTACT ADVERTISING & SALES
Address inquiries to: *CGW* Advertising, 50 Beale St., 12th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94105; phone: (415) 357-4778; fax: (415) 357-4999.
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And the Winner Is...?

I've been at *CGW* for almost six years. That's a long time. Not as long as Ken Brown, who started during the California gold rush 150 years ago, but still six years. Why, I remember when *Duke Nukem Forever* was first announced!

Every year at this time, I've joined the rest of the odd-smelling dimwits here to vote on the games of the year. Most of the time, the vote for the Game of the Year has not presented much of a problem. *Jedi Knight*, *Half-Life*, *Unreal Tournament*, *The Sims*: These are all games whose candidacy—if not outright victory—as Game of the Year was apparent the day we cracked the shrink-wrap.

This year, however, was different. This year, right up until December 31, there was no clear-cut winner, no one game so obviously superior to the rest of pack, no one game that seemed to unite the entire PC gaming community—regardless of age, gender, and gaming habits—behind its greatness. This isn't to say there weren't great games in 2001. There were. A ton.

Right up until December 31, there was no one game obviously superior to the rest.

For me, 2001 was the year of the following: *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction*, *Wizardry 8*, *Anachronox*, *Stronghold*, and *Civ III*. Those are the games I lost the most sleep over, the ones that obsessed me and made me play way past the point of all reason. If you ask the other *CGW* editors for their lists, you'll get completely different titles. Some will say *IL-2 Sturmovik* or *Operation Flashpoint* or, in the case of the obsessive-compulsive Robert Coffey, *Bejeweled*.

More than any year since I've been here, the *CGW* editors were completely splintered in their gaming obsessions. Deathmatches, which used to grind this magazine to a halt, were practically nonexistent, except for the awesome multiplayer demo level of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, which finally rallied us all behind a single game. If the *Wolf* single-player experience had been better, we might have had a consensus for Game of the Year.

Ultimately, it boiled down to two games: one an expected (but still great) candidate, and the other a game that, one year ago, most of us had never even heard of. I'm not going to spill the beans here, but I do want to say this up front: I think we got it right. Our winner is assuredly not a game, like *The Sims*, that you can rush out and buy for your mom, grandma, nephews, and girlfriend and expect them all to love. That was not the story of 2001.

The story of 2001 was how PC gaming, reeling a bit from excessive console hype and financial woes, was reborn and reclaimed by the hardcore faithful, by those who embraced the platform unapologetically and made the best damn games they could, without staring nervously at their pocketbooks or hedging their bets with an Xbox version. Our Game of the Year is one that takes advantage of the PC's strengths and then pushes it forward to offer gamers an experience unlike any other. It has the ambition, innovation, and originality seen in all of our past winners.

Is it the consensus Game of the Year? Is it the one you would have picked? I'm sure you'll let us know.

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief

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Letters

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

One Mag to Rule Them All

I was just flipping through your mag when I spotted something peculiar on the sidebar of your editorial page. I read the names of people who make *CGW* (February 2002, page 15). Dimple Sandybanks, Dimple Bumbleroot, and Dimple Brownlock work for you, huh? If those are names of actual people, then I will buy a lifetime subscription to your magazine. I know we guys like to joke around and all, but this is pretty childish. Oh, I'll just forget Bungo Flamwich, Marigold Brockhouse, Clo Hardbottle, and Brambleross Brandybuck. I bet those imaginary people REALLY help put out such an excellent and informative publication. SHEESH!

Todo Bumbleroot

Listen, pal, it's not our fault that you can't recognize Hobbit names when you see them. As punishment, we put YOUR name into the same Hobbit name generator that we used (www.chriswetherell.com/hobbit). Now shut up and pass the pipeweed.

A Wargame in Poor Taste?

Just read your review of *World War III Black Gold* in the February issue of *CGW*. Normally I find your reviews accurate and enjoyable to read. My beef isn't with the fact that Thomas L. McDonald gave it 2.5 stars, though others rated it much higher. What really pisses me off is McDonald's constant reminder to the reader that this product is in "poor taste." That because we are at war with Muslim extremists, we shouldn't have a PC game about the U.S. and Muslim extremists fighting. Um, isn't war always in poor taste, McDonald? How is a game about running around caves shooting Nazis better than one about running around shooting at terrorists? You feel that because one can play the terrorist side in the game and can launch nuclear missiles at the U.S. base, that this game shouldn't have been released? So, *Red Alert* was "okay" and in "good taste" because one could launch nuclear weapons at Russians? It's strange—*CGW* never draws a line with PC games, but when a political hotspot is covered in a game, suddenly *CGW* is conservative and labels the game in "poor taste." Thomas McDonald should stop reviewing PC games and go work for Jerry Falwell.

Lance Nutter

The one thing to keep in mind, Lance, is that shooting Nazis is always cool.

I Am Wil

CGW Hardware Editor William O'Neal displays his idiocy for the whole world to see in his "How to Build a System" article (February 2002), as he holds the manual upside down in the first step. What's wrong, Wil? First the 900GHz processor typo and now this?

Andrew Schran

We sort of agree with you, but isn't it endearing in an *I Am Sam* way that Wil is trying to read at all?

In-Game Saves: Readers Weigh In

I'd like to comment on the article in the February 2002 issue about in-game saves (*CGW* Deathmatch): Leave it up to the user. A 16-year old may have lots of time on his hands, but for someone like me—who's 30, soon to be married with a stepson, and works 50-plus hours a week—a more frequent save-game option is needed for my enjoyment of a game in my limited time. If I have to continually replay a mission, I lose interest. Leave it up to us, guys—you'll have more happy customers that way.

Ceasar81

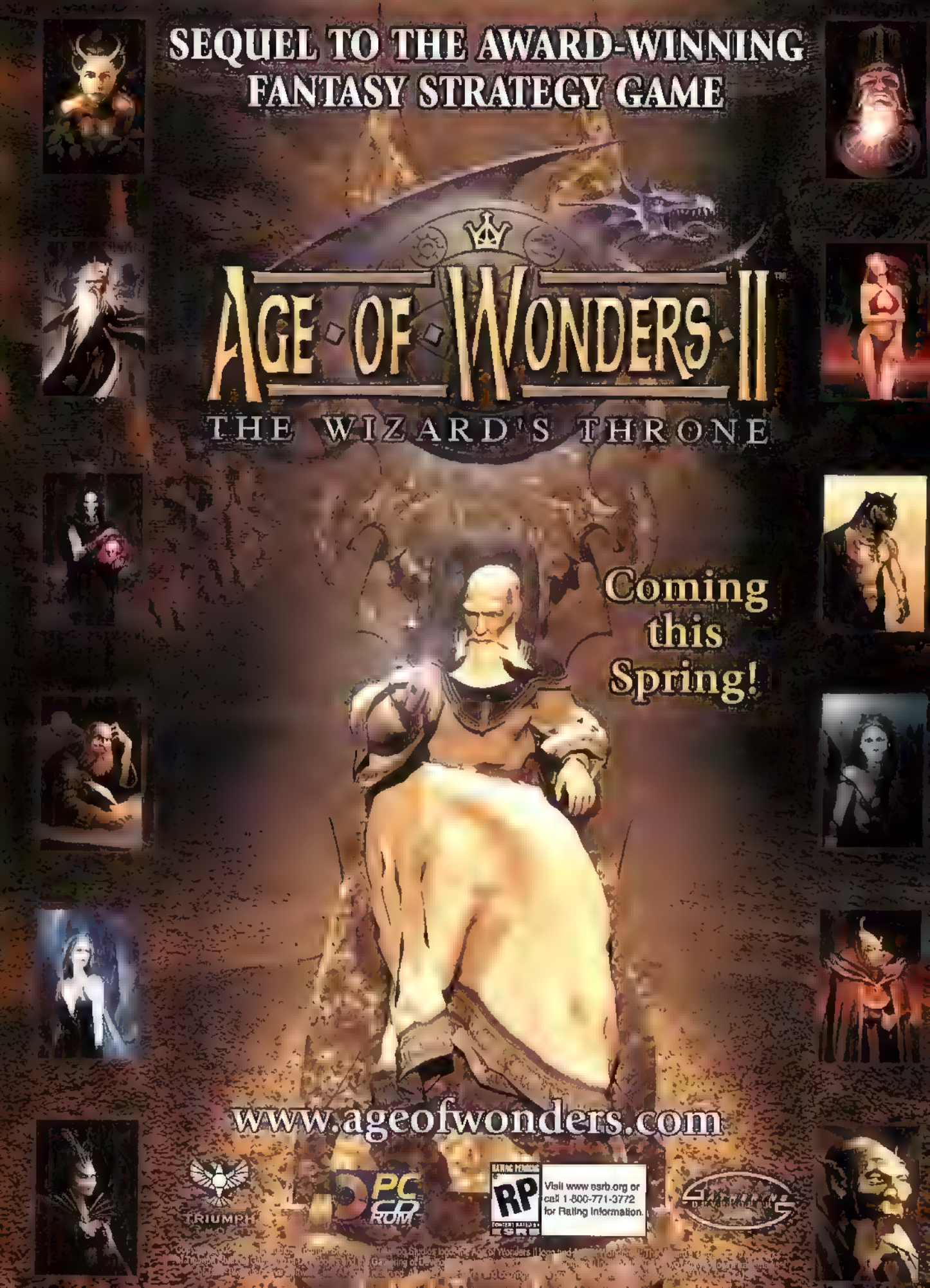
I was one of those who uninstalled *Hitman* due to its lack of an in-game save. I thought it was a great game, but having to start from the beginning every time is just ridiculous. These developers have to remember that they're making games for *us*. If we want saves, then by golly give us saves. At least give us the *option* of using in-game saves. Reward us if we don't. Maybe give us a longer ending if we don't use saves. Compromise. If Janos Flosser (*Hitman 2*'s lead animator) is so hell-bent on realism, then how about this: The first time you die, the game is over, the game uninstalls itself, and will never install again. Your new slogan could be, "In real life you only get one chance." Sounds fun, huh?

Wallix

I played *Hitman*. I loved the fact that you couldn't save in a mission; it made it so much harder. Yes, I had times when I wanted to throw my computer across the room, but I'd take a break, and come back to it the next day. I loved it when I finally worked through that game.

The only rational reason I have heard for a save anywhere feature is if you

ILLUSTRATION BY JESS REPPETEAUX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don't have time to play an entire mission at a time. What about a suspend-game feature—like one save that gets deleted when you load it? Yes, other people will say that I could always just not save, so the save should be included for them. I'd like to respond that it's hypocritical to complain games are too easy, and then whine when something like a save anywhere feature is not included.

Wolfcaller

I don't want people making moral decisions for me in real life, and I certainly don't want them making them for me in games. If I shell out my hard-earned money on a game, I don't want some uptight, anal, gaming obsessotron standing there telling me how to play the game and punishing me for indiscretions. I am paying to have fun, and if I am not skilled enough to play with only a few save games or no save games, shouldn't I still get to have fun? Gamers can make their own decisions whether or not to save and how much they wish to be challenged. The option, however, should be theirs, not someone else's.

Beth Warner
Houston, Texas

The two opinions put forth in the article have completely missed the boat. It's not what *they* want, it's what *I* want. I being the guy who, they hope, will buy the game. Allow me to decide if I want to save a wretched game—after all, it's my experience at that point. Don't deny me the option because you think it compromises the suspense and adrenaline. The fact that the makers of *Hitman 2* are still divided obviously means they haven't cottoned onto why the original game didn't get better reviews. If they want to make a game for themselves rather than the consumer, then they shouldn't expect me to buy it.

EvilRoy

The Great Escape

Jeff, how can you abide such ignorance in your staff? For a glaring example, look no further than the *Prisoner of War* preview in your February issue. John Houlihan states that in the movie *The Great Escape*, James Coburn paddles his way down the Rhine to freedom. Everybody knows that it was Charles Bronson who paddled his way down the Danube to freedom. (James Coburn rode a bicycle to Paris and escaped through Spain.) It's bad enough that one of your underlings made this mistake, but I am sorely disappointed that an editor whom I hold in such esteem could let this slip by.

Kevin Manning
Alexandria, Virginia

P.S. My wife (who is not a gamer but for some unknown reason reads Greenspeak religiously) recently used the term "level up" in a business meeting. I'm pretty sure this is your fault.

Jeff Green responds: James Coburn? Charles Bronson? I thought *Prisoner of War* was based on *Chicken Run*.

Gabba Gabba We Accept You

As a new subscriber, I want to tell you how much I enjoy your magazine. At 45 I'm new to the gaming world. It's a little hard to decipher some of the lingo. A year ago I didn't know the difference between an AI and an RPG. I'm slowly getting it down. Reading your publication has made me feel good about my gaming obsession. Your writers, like Scott McCloud, intellectualize what I had previously considered a flaw in my personality. Your reviews and previews help me in making my limited game time (I'm married with a 2-year old) more efficient. I just want to thank you again. It makes it easier for me to know there are others like me out there, at midnight, obsessed over some stupid game, and hoping that the wife doesn't find out.

Brian McGowan

God Save the Queen

I was disappointed to read your review of *The Weakest Link* on page 99 of the February 2002 issue. While I'm sure your assessment of the game is accurate, the snide sideswipe at Britain (always our greatest ally) was unnecessary.

John

Good point. They were an especially great ally back in 1776.

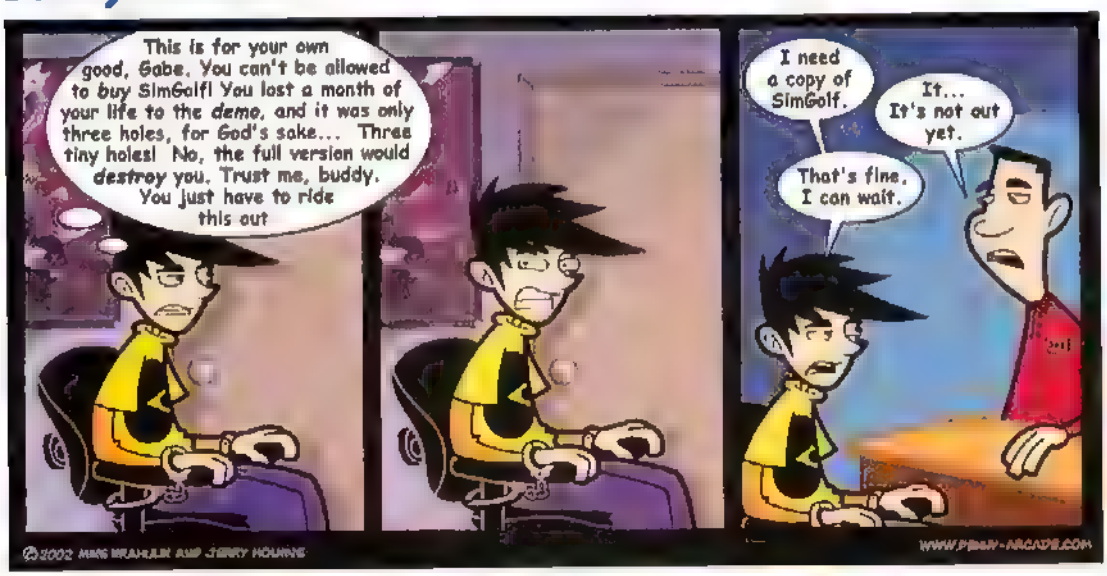
Games...and Canadians

This is not an angry "I'll never read CGW again" letter. It's just a note to complain about the amount your writers talk about themselves. WHO CARES?! I hate hearing people's life stories or how great it is to be a reviewer! I'm sick of Jeff Green's back page. Talk about GAMES! Your CD is great, but please include more add-ons and patches, not strictly demos. I have read CGW since the '80s, when wargames were most of the content. Thanks. (Love the Canuck bashing!)

Barry

MAIL BITES

Penny Arcade BY MIKE KRAHULIK AND JERRY HOLKINS



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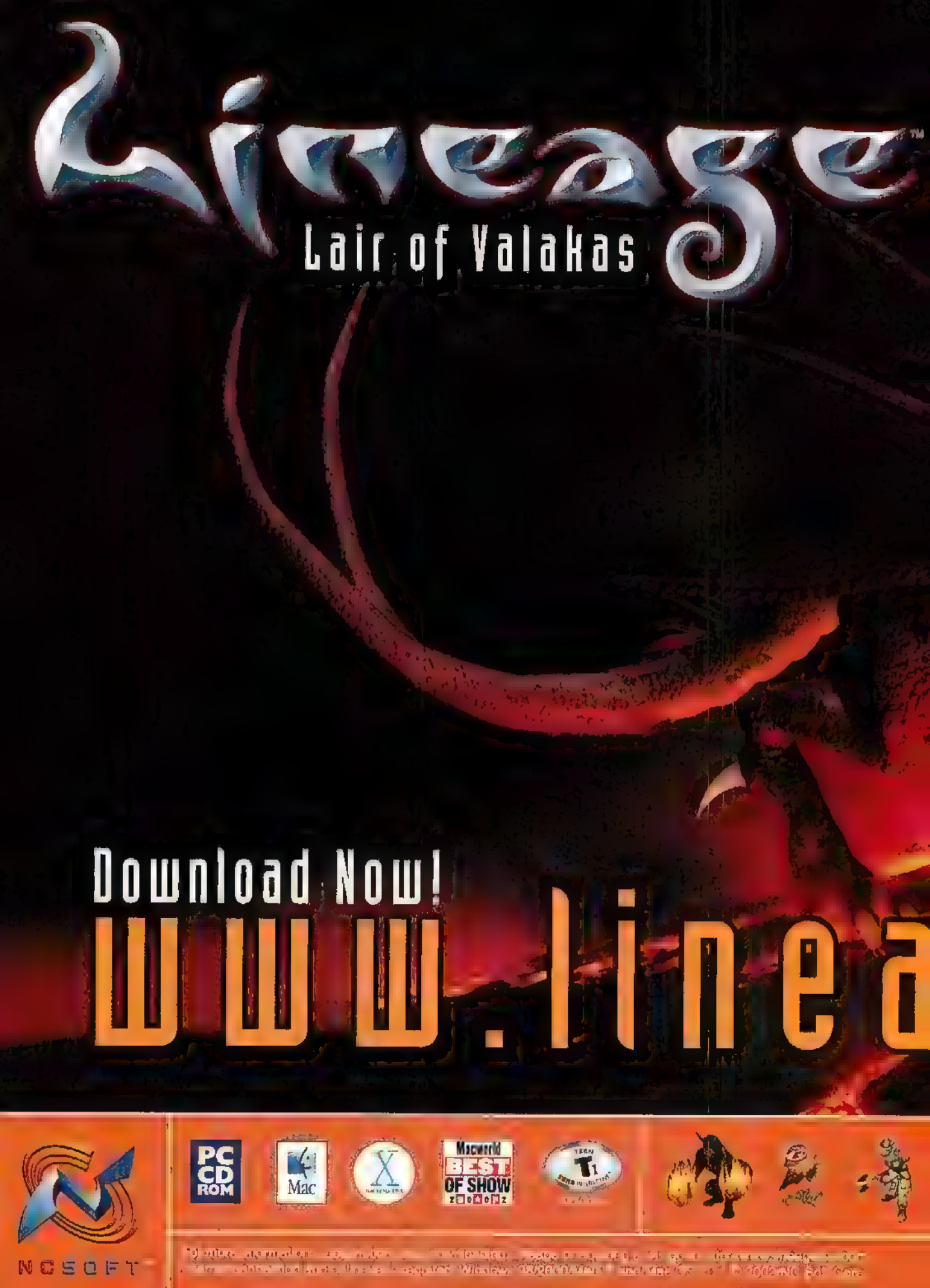
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The hottest shots of the best new games Edited by Tom Price

All of the [illegible] rich[illegible] detailed [illegible] to have [illegible] noses all over them.

HITMAN 2

We're not afraid to admit it; we were disappointed in the original *Hitman*. We really really wanted to like it, but the fact that there was no in-mission save kind of ruined it for us. But we definitely enjoyed the challenging puzzle elements, clever movie references, and wild gunplay. All that stuff and much more is back in *Hitman 2*, along with the much-needed save-game feature. Heck, they even threw in first-person mode for traditionalists and a whole slew of new and deadly weapons. You'll be wetting fools in no time.

Hey sniper-boy! You just won the wet T-shirt contest!
The brand-new rendering engine makes for some pretty dramatic lighting effects.
Old UPC-head just wants to live his life in peace, but they keep pulling him back in.

MEDIEVAL: TOTAL WAR

While we loved *Shogun: Total War*'s authentic feudal Japanese aesthetic, we thought that the amazing engine—which modeled massive battles involving thousands of units—could easily be applied to other theatres of war. The Creative Assembly, developers of the game, apparently felt the same and are now bringing us *Medieval: Total War*. Set in medieval Europe and covering 300 years of history, *Medieval: Total War* will give gamers that sense of enormous battlefield clashes, but with even more features than the original *Shogun*.

Trebuchets,
we love
trebuchets.
The number
of units
engaged in
battle will be
even more
massive then
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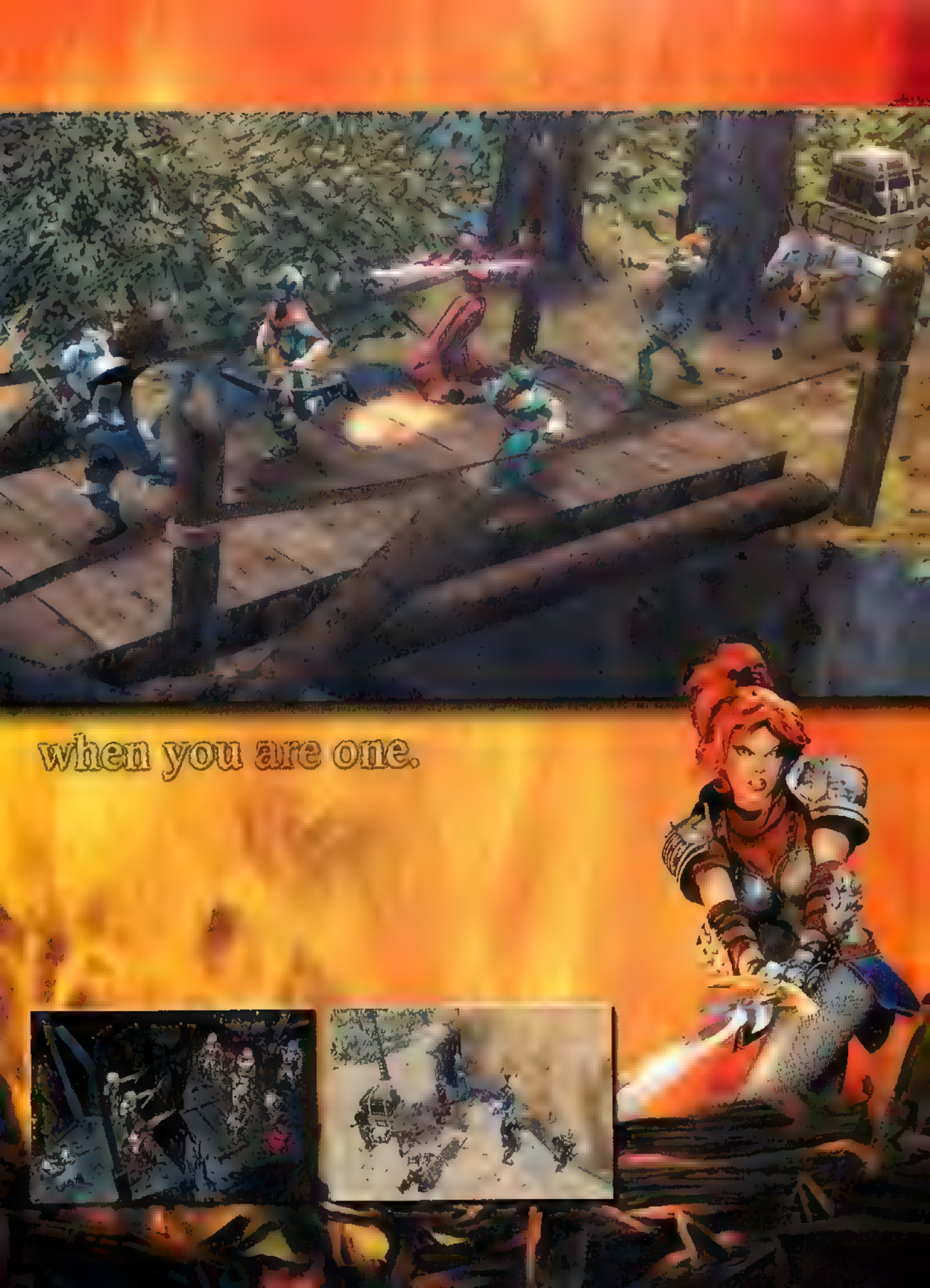
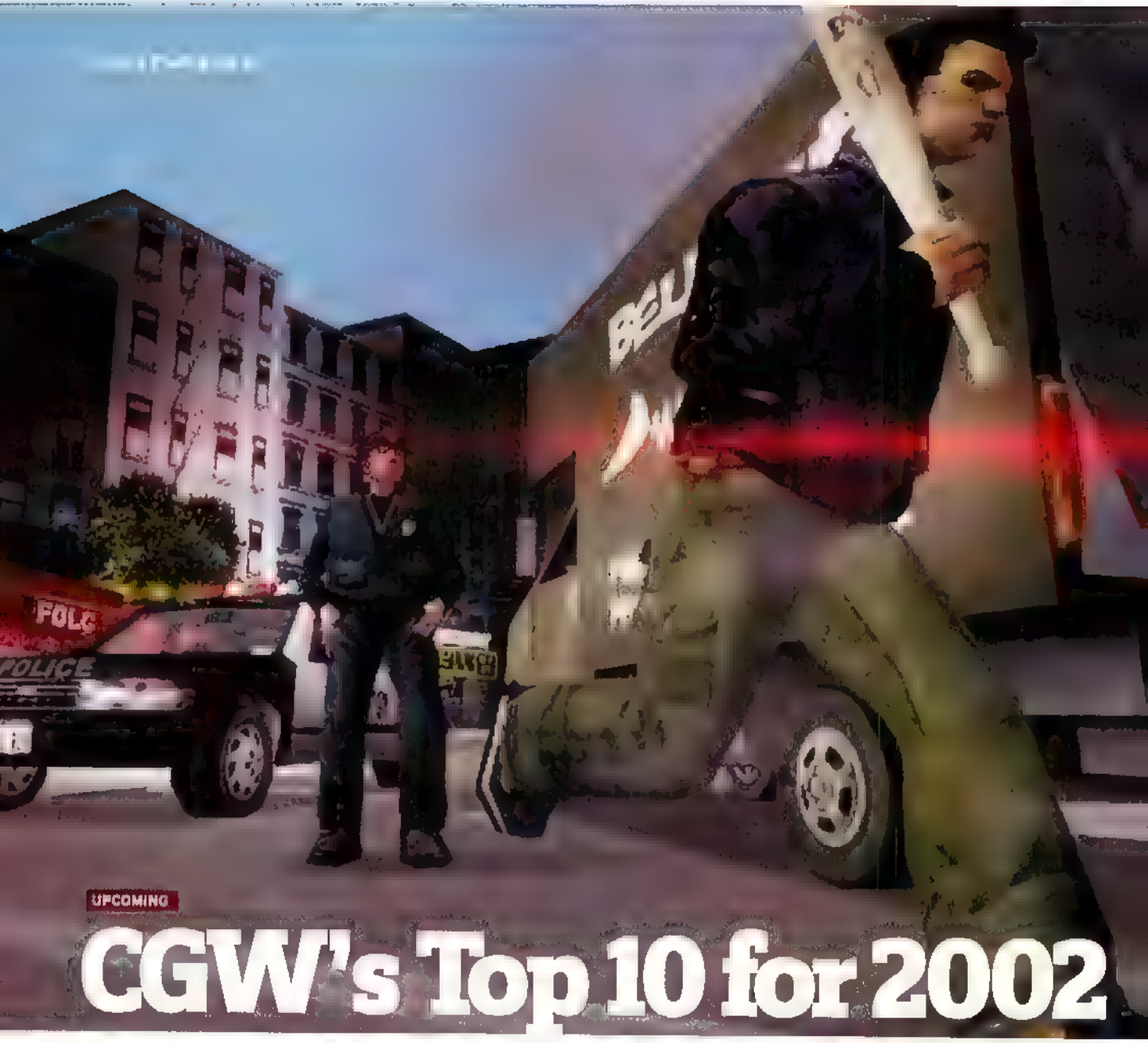

when you are one.

Read Me

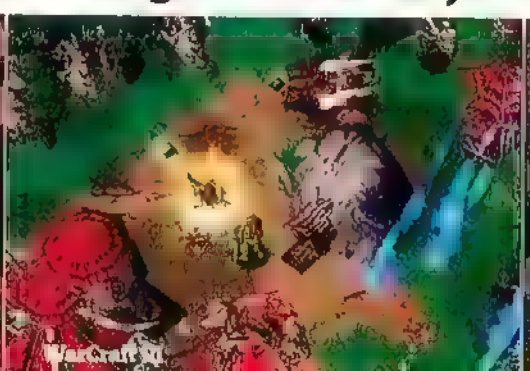
A smorgasbord of news, opinion, and random stuff Edited by Ken Brown

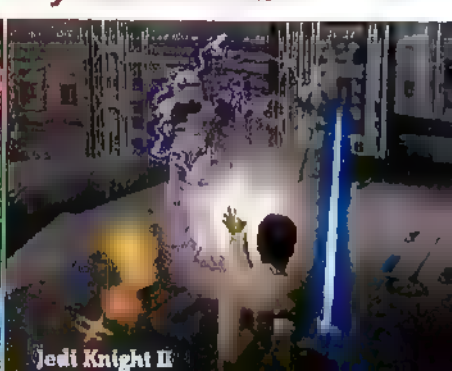


UPCOMING

CGW's Top 10 for 2002

The games we're most looking forward to this year* by Ken Brown



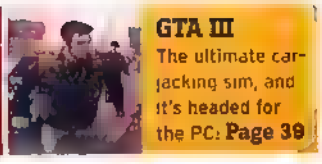


INSIDE

EARTH AND BEYOND
Don't call it a space sim in front of Westwood. **Page 32**

STAR WARS
You'll shoot more than womp rats in *Star Wars Galaxies*. **Page 33**

TACTICAL OPS
Counter-Strike-style mod draws a bead on retail. **Page 36**

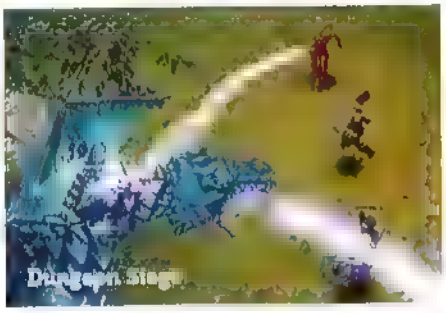


GTA III
The ultimate car-jacking sim, and it's headed for the PC: **Page 39**

What a difference a month makes. Four weeks ago the staff was sitting around a conference room table grumbling about the choices for 2001 games of the year. But we're now looking at an absolute banner year for PC gaming, the kind that makes you want to stand up and warble like Enrique Iglesias and shake your butt in front of old Fern in accounting. (For your sake, don't.)

In addition to those mentioned below, there are easily a half-dozen titles that very few people would argue with—*Team Fortress 2*, *Duke Nukem Forever*, *Heroes of Might and Magic IV*, *Earth and Beyond*, *Medal of Honor 3*, and *Bonestorm*—just to name a few. In case you're wondering, we left *Medal of Honor Allied Assault* off this list because we're no longer looking forward to it—we already know it's great.

How does this compare with your list? Tell us what a bunch of goons we are on the *CGW* forum at gamers.com, or write us at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com



Age of Mythology The creators of *Age of Empires* are working on a hellacious god game in which you can uncork lightning and meteors on your enemies and mop up their soldiers with huge mythological beasts. Plus, they're focusing heavily on an exciting and robust single-player campaign.

Counter-Strike: Condition Zero As if we couldn't get enough CS already, a huge update with new skins, maps, weapons, and an independent single-player campaign is due in early spring.

Dungeon Siege *Dungeon Siege* is systematically eliminating every annoying, horrible convention of RPGs to create a game that lets you just jump in, bash bad guys, and love every minute of it.

Freedom Force The answer to countless geeks' prayers—a comic book PC game—should be out soon. We've already fallen in love with the game's sense of humor and *X-COM*-style strategic combat. From the geniuses who brought you *System Shock 2*.

Grand Theft Auto III This game has accolades like "PlayStation 2 Game of the Year" and "Action Game of the Year" slathered all over it. Now we can see what the big deal is.

Jedi Knight II The vast levels, the killer Force powers, the light-saber combat—it's all coming back to this highly anticipated follow-up to Hall of Fame inductee *Jedi Knight*.

Neverwinter Nights Bioware's follow-up to their acclaimed *Baldur's Gate* series is probably the most ambitious attempt ever to translate a real *D&D* role-playing experience to the PC. It's *the* big RPG event of the year.

We're now looking at an absolute banner year in PC gaming.

No One Lives Forever 2 Pistol-packing minx Cate Archer is making a comeback this year. The sequel to our 2000 Action Game of the Year promises new bad guys, better AI, and more variety. See the cover story for more.

Unreal II/Unreal Tournament II Forget about *Halo* and the infernal Xbox. The PC is the home of the next must-have FPS. *Unreal II*. And if *Unreal Tournament II* is released this year too, we could have a very interesting showdown for Game of the Year.

WarCraft III Yes, it's really almost here. The folks at Blizzard always take their time, but then they always deliver the goods. We're expecting nothing less than brilliance from this welcome return to their flagship strategy series.

The Wild Cards There are many more games we wanted to include, but we weren't sure they'd even ship this year. At the top of that list, it's safe to say, would be *Half-Life 2*. That's probably the one game Jeff Green would unhesitatingly trade a soaking wet Leelee Sobieski for. We're also more than eager to play *Halo* on the PC—with multiplayer—but "Bungiesoft's" vague assurances that we'll get it someday don't really cut it. We're expecting *Star Wars Galaxies* to be a monster in terms of overall production values and narcotic level addictiveness, but that level of detail takes a long time to get right (especially in a massively multiplayer game). We hope it comes out this year, but we wouldn't bet on it.

**Unless somebody releases Alley Cats II.*

HANDS ON

Earth and Beyond

Will it succeed where *Anarchy Online* flopped? Westwood thinks it will By Robert Coffey

Unless you want to have your head caved in with bolt cutters, for the love of God don't call *Earth and Beyond* a space sim in front of anyone from Westwood Studios. Seriously.

Getting *Earth and Beyond* perceived as the massively multiplayer online RPG that it is and not as some joystick-yanking, steep-learning-curve sci-fi simulator is Westwood's biggest hurdle. Because when you look at it, you see outer space, asteroid fields, nav buoys, spaceships firing laser beams—gee, isn't that a space sim? Nope. Not when the combat is handled in a real-time, phased way like, oh, *Anarchy Online*. And not when your combat success is dependent on your gear, your abilities, and your character skills like in, let's say, *EverQuest*. Not when you're racking up experience points to develop a unique character.

Spaceships firing ray guns look a lot cooler than dwarves in loincloths whacking rats with clubs.

We spent some time playing on Westwood's closed beta and we couldn't have been more impressed. For those of us disappointed by *Anarchy Online*'s online pratfall, *Earth and Beyond* seems to be the solid sci-fi answer to all those effort-ented online RPGs. The interface is incredibly intuitive, easily trumping that of any current online game (all those years building the mass-market *C&C* games has obviously taught Westwood something). Graphically, *Earth and Beyond* looks great, especially when you see the art for the new spaceships created by Academy Award-winner Doug Chiang, design director for *Star Wars Episodes I* and *II* and *Terminator 2*. Those ships are currently being worked in to an already visually rich environment.

Yes, we had our doubts. How could Westwood, a developer arguably good at just one thing (real-time strategy games) pull off a persistent-world online RPG? But our time spent just creating and starting characters in the game was very encouraging. Instead of thrusting us cluelessly into an enormous, incomprehensible world, managing a character with a bazillion impenetrable stats, *Earth and Beyond* phases in the nuances of the game so that early on there's no difficulty in getting a handle on your character and little likelihood of making that killer stat mistake. We really liked the in-game tutorial, which had us learning how to play while actively developing our characters from the get-go. Sure, we just blasted little evil drones and mined ore from asteroids in the newbie zone, but spaceships firing ray guns look a whole lot cooler than dwarves in loincloths whacking rats with clubs.

Earth and Beyond seems to be doing a number of other things right. Death shouldn't piss you off too much—you'll be towed back to a space station but you won't lose your stuff or, more important, experience points. A random mission generator à la *Anarchy Online* should keep you busy, and three ways to get experience (combat, exploration, and trade) should provide a more varied playing experience than the usual "kill everything" model of other games.

We'll have more on *Earth and Beyond* once the beta opens up...provided we stop playing long enough to write about it.

THE GOOD, THE

THE GOOD: NEVERWINTER NIGHTS RETURNS!

Okay, we can exhale now. The world is right once more. *Neverwinter Nights*, Bioware's highly anticipated role-playing game, is finally back on track and scheduled for release this year, to be published by Infogrames. Bioware's *Baldur's Gate* series is a future Hall of Fame contender, and *Neverwinter Nights* is even more ambitious. We can't wait.

THE BAD: INTERPLAY ON THE ROPES

The downside of The Good is that Interplay has now lost forever their fruitful partnership with Bioware, whose RPGs had single-handedly revitalized the company. With the recent departure of longtime CEO Brian Fargo, the vultures are circling in full force, possibly meaning the end is near for yet another former PC gaming powerhouse.

THE UGLY: DANA'S *SIMGOLF* ADDICTION

We're not sure whether to laugh or cry, to celebrate or mourn. All we know is that Dana, our managing editor—hired to keep the other editors from playing games all day—has now started geeking out herself, thanks to (who else?) Sid Meier. Yep, Sid's roped another one in with his amazing new *SimGolf*—and *CGW* is lawless once more. Woo-hoo!

UPDATE

Rock, Scissors, Light Saber

What's your weapon of choice for *Star Wars Galaxies*? By Ken Brown

Although combat is often limited in massively multiplayer online games—with most fights looking like the "I hack now you slash" routine of RPGs from years ago, combat in *Star Wars Galaxies* promises to be anything but routine. In fact, if the designers meet their goals, *Galaxies* combat should make existing online games look downright obsolete.

The designers appear to be making a wholehearted effort to portray combat in all the ways you'd expect. Want to shoot stormtroopers with blasters? Fine. Wield a light saber and lop off a Zabrak's demonic head? Cool. Fancy yourself a Wookiee who's deadly with a bowcaster? Go for it. To make all those things look real, Sony is hard at work making hundreds of combat animations to depict everything from fistfights to blaster battles with Imperial Walkers.

In keeping with the *Star Wars* universe, most of the combat involves ranged weapons, says producer Haden Blackman. So the team is developing skills that deal with various aspects of blasters and other ranged weapons. These skills might "increase your accuracy, improve your rate of fire, or allow you to use better weapons more effectively," he says.

All of the weapons will have default attacks that allow you to respond quickly to a hostile situation. Blackman says some weapons will also allow special moves and attacks, such as a headshot or a dodge. Damage will be based on hit locations, so where you aim will be important.

Fortunately, you can maneuver to try to evade enemy fire. If you behave defensively, you'll be harder to hit. You can also protect yourself with various types of armor, personal deflector shields, and other defenses (use the Force, ya shnook).

But when all else fails, and your blaster's fired its last bolt, you can always go back to good old-fashioned bare-knuckle brawling. Even in a galaxy far, far away, sometimes a fistfight is the only way to settle a score.

COMING SOON! The definitive, in-depth story on *Star Wars Galaxies*. We'll take you behind the scenes for the world's first hands-on look at this landmark game. Coming in the June issue of *CGW*—and nowhere else.

"We're trying to make combat feel very cinematic."

REALITY CHECK

Reality Check compares the ratings of the major gaming press with GameRankings.com, which averages all published reviews for a particular title.

GAME	CGW	PC Gamer	GMR	Gamespot	IGN	GameRankings.com
Aquanox	B-	C	B-	C	B-	C+
IL-2 Sturmovik	A+	A	A+	A	B+	A-
Majestic	D-	C-	D	*	B	B-
Medal of Honor Allied Assault	A	A	A	*	A	B+
Motor City Online	D	B+	D	B	B	B
Survivor: The Interactive Game	F	F	*	F	F	D-
Wizardry 8	A+	A-	A	A	B	A-

* NO RATING AVAILABLE AT PRESS TIME

"One of the most innovative and appealing cross-genre approaches yet."
- IGN.com
"As if Renegade weren't unique as it is... Command & Conquer mode definitely sets it apart from the competition."
- GameSpot
"...Renegade may well become the new CounterStrike for many of us."
- Electric Playground Online
VICTORY IS AT HAND
"Action fans, this is one game you should definitely wait for."
- GameSpy.com
"It is a Command & Conquer fan's dream come true."
- PC Game Central
"Renegade is not a game to miss."
- AVault.com
The list goes on. Now it's your turn to experience for yourself the intense first-person action of Command & Conquer™ at ground level. Explore, drive, snipe and blast your way through the gripping singleplayer campaign, then take it online in our exclusive team-based multiplayer 'C&C' mode. You up to the task, soldier?
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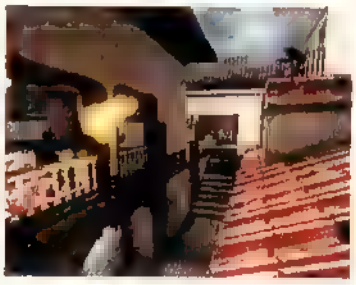


HANDS ON

Tac Ops Breaks Out

Counter-Strike-style *Unreal Tournament* mod comes to a store near you **By Thierry Nguyen**

Here's another instance of the little guy growing into something much bigger. *Tactical Ops*, the action-packed *Unreal Tournament* mod that plays a lot like *Counter-Strike*, has proven so popular that Infogrames is publishing it as a stand-alone game. So even if you didn't have *Unreal Tournament* (or if you did but were too slow or lazy to download this mod), you can pick this up off the shelf and start taking out terrorists with realistic weapons.

The main way this game differs from *Counter Strike* is in the inclusion of the more up-to-date *UT* engine, which generates fantastic-looking, great-playing levels. The single-player game is a lot like *UT*'s, being essentially a bot-laden practice session for eventual multiplayer matches. You join a team and have to either defend and capture objectives or rescue and hold hostages. Then again, the bots on your team will actually obey you when you tell them to cover you in a firefight.

Tactical Ops will also feature a host of new scenarios in combating terror that were made specifically for the retail release. New maps include places like a deserted Mexican village, a mountain complex, and even a mansion. Additionally, netcode will be refined, and there will be new skins and tweaks to the various weapons.

Hopefully, the solid foundation the free mod provided will make for a great alternative to *Counter-Strike*. Watch for it under the MicroProse label this spring.

There will be a host of new scenarios that were made specifically for the retail release.

5, 10, 15 YEARS AGO IN CGW

Five Years Ago, April 1997

In his editorial, CGW godhead and all-around teddy bear Johnny Wilson predicted both fewer games in the future as well as the coming popularity of online gaming. As French companies have engulfed U.S. development houses and as game-producing costs have risen, Johnny's predictions have certainly come true. As for online gaming, he was a little off on his prediction that it wouldn't take hold until 2005—but he was dead-on about it being the future of our hobby.

Ten Years Ago, April 1992

Not exactly our most compelling issue ever—this magazine even sported a full-page ad for a program to help you design your own model railroad. Created by the god-awfully named Abracadata, the software had the added feature of letting you "entertain" yourself solving the program's switching puzzles. Far more entertaining was the challenge in our rumor column to find the three subliminally hidden words on the *Leisure Suit Larry 5* box.

Fifteen Years Ago, April 1987

In an interview with real-life baseball guru Earl Weaver, *Earl Weaver Baseball* programmer Eddie Dombrower stunned our editors with the revelation that his game based play outcomes on physics as well as stats. "Are you serious?" blurted the boggled CGW braintrust. Fifteen years later every sports game worth its silicon has adopted the basic model of this Hall of Fame game.

PERSPECTIVE: POST-MORTEM

By Bruce Geryk

Sid Meier's Civilization III

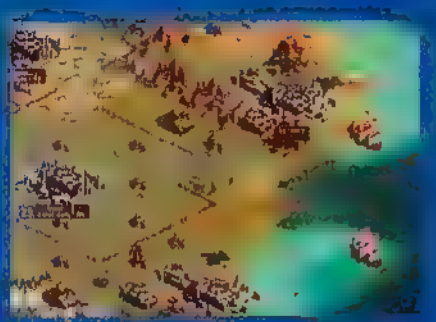
When *Civilization III* came out, mixed in with all the accolades were a number of complaints about some big problems: insufficiently diverse citizens, difficulty selecting things, and *no playable map of Earth*. You might expect these sorts of faults to bring down the average game. But either *Civ III* is no ordinary game, or those problems aren't as big a deal as the game's detractors think.

Take my two roommates, for instance. Neither one really pays attention to which games are coming out, except to ask every time I get a game in the mail, "Is that one good?" Regardless of my response, they invariably move along to watch TV, do their laundry, or go out with their girlfriends. So imagine my surprise when both asked me independently, "When is *Civ III* coming out?"

I was even more shocked after my copy arrived. Even though I was playing it for an assignment, the two of them regularly trooped into my office to ask, "Are you using *Civilization III* right now?" Once I had finished writing, the game vanished into the basement, where we've set up a four-machine LAN. A virtual war for the CD ensued, with each of them playing at ridiculous hours and trying to beat each other home so they could grab it first.

Eventually, both were forced to buy their own copies. One of my roommates is in medical school, and he's overdue with a key assignment. Yet *every time* I've gone to the basement in the six weeks since the game was released, I've seen his computer screen filled with cities, railroads, and military units. I'm pretty sure he hasn't submitted that paper yet.

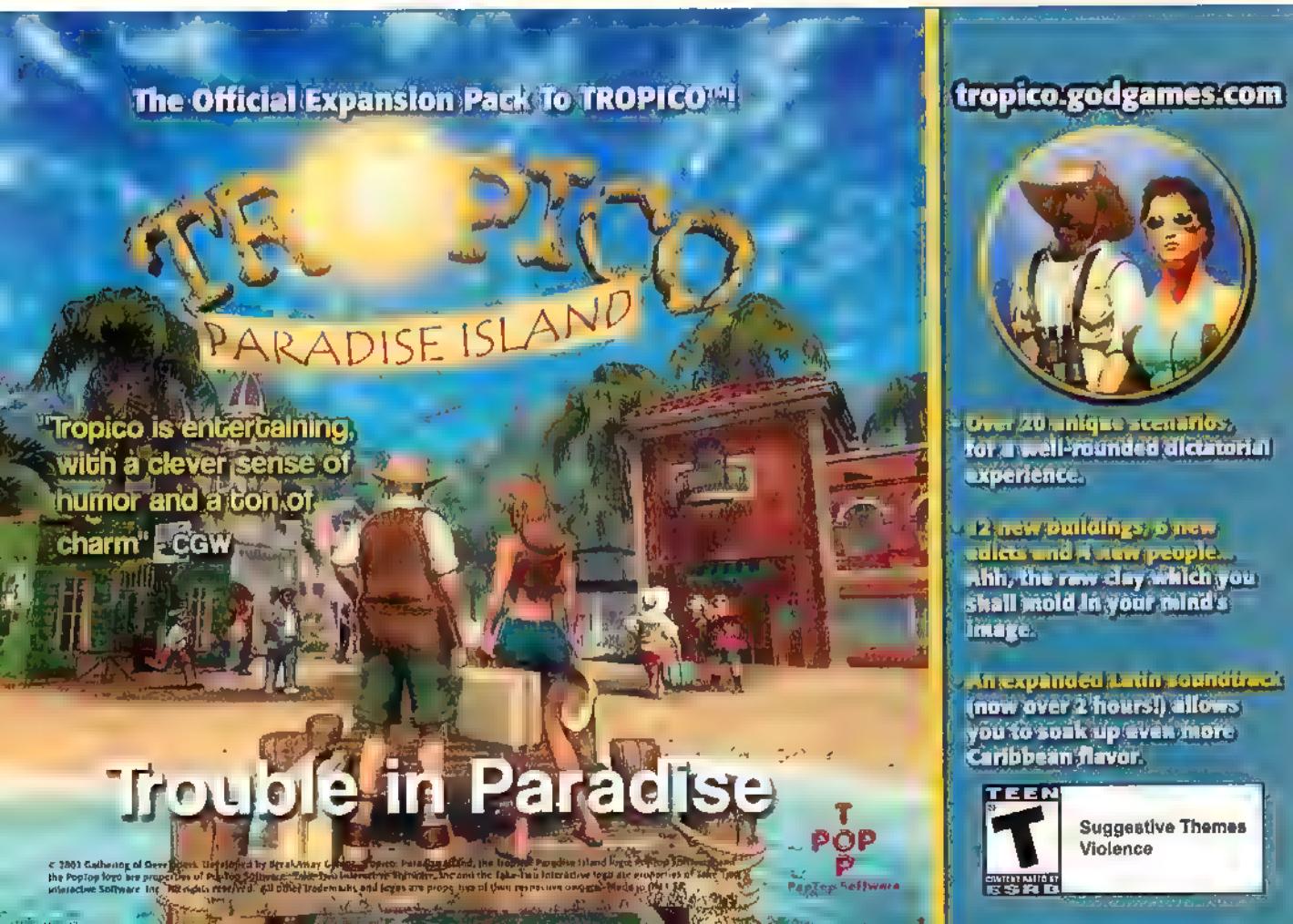
I mentioned to them that I had heard complaints that the game didn't feature a real Earth map to play on, to which their response was a simultaneous, "What?" The only complaints they had *at all* were technical bugs that either made the game crash or



unplayable. Otherwise, it was just fine.

A lot of gamers seem to equate "casual gamers" with "stupid people," but my roommates are anything but dumb. The fact that they were so completely hooked by *Civilization III* shows that while Firaxis may have come up with a spectacular design, hardcore gamers will complain about anything. *Civ III* was supposed to be a more accessible game than the hardcore-gamers dream, *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*. Based on my roommates' reactions, it seems like it just might be.

A lot of gamers seem to equate "casual gamers" with "stupid people."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PARADISE ISLAND
"Tropico is entertaining, with a clever sense of humor and a ton of charm" - CGW
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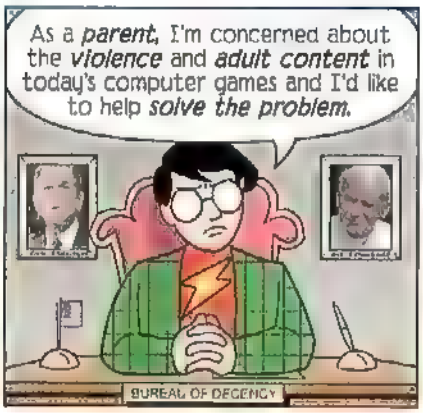
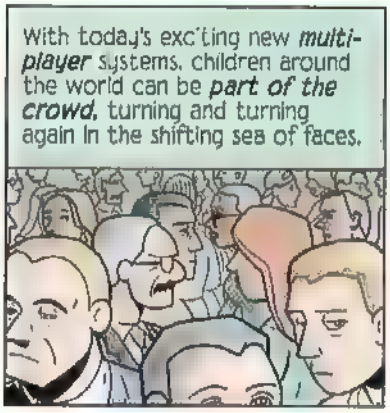
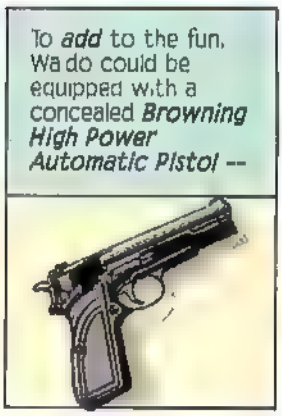
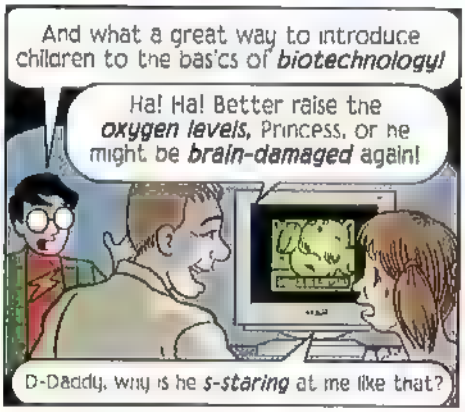
tropico.godgames.com
Over 20 unique scenarios, for a well-rounded dictatorial experience.
12 new buildings, 6 new edicts and 4 new people... Ahh, the raw clay which you shall mold in your mind's image.
An expanded Latin soundtrack (now over 2 hours!) allows you to soak up even more Caribbean flavor.
TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Suggestive Themes
Violence

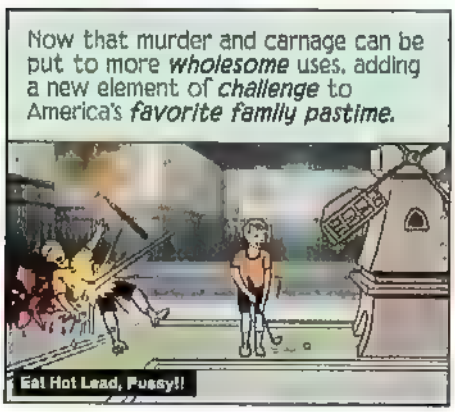
DISCOVERINGGAMES

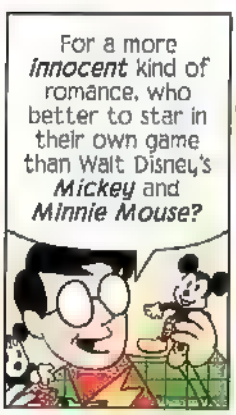








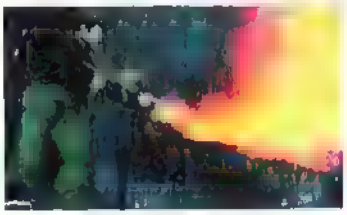




PREVIEW

Grand Theft Auto III

Next month, PC gamers get to see why all the PS2 gamers are hyping *Grand Theft Auto III*, the mob enforcer simulator we always wanted. You'll get missions like killing a witness, providing a getaway vehicle, or collecting payments from underling pimps, but how you finish the missions is completely up to you. You're given the freedom to choose your approach—which car you want to steal or whether you feel like destroying any authority figures in your way. *GTA III* gives PC gamers the choices they have always clamored for, plus there's better sound and graphics (no more jagged edges), so the already-superb PS2 title gets an enhanced look. Carjacking time begins next month.



GAME SALES

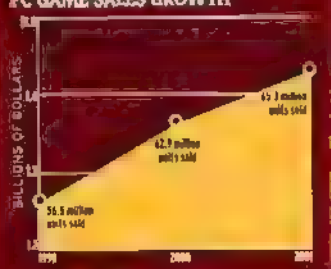
2001: A Sales Odyssey

The best-selling PC games from last year

Despite the economic slowdown, lower PC sales volume, the console avalanche, and September 11, sales volume of PC games for 2001 actually grew over 2000. Electronic Arts batted .500 in 2001, an outstanding average for any big league slugger or publisher. But the secret of their success almost comes down to one man: Will Wright designed the No. 1 best-seller and four of the top 10.
Source: NPDTechworld

1. The Sims (EA)
2. Roller Coaster Tycoon (Infogrames)
3. Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone (EA)
4. Diablo II Expansion: Lord of Destruction (Vivendi)
5. The Sims: House Party Expansion (EA)
6. The Sims: Livin' Large Expansion (EA)
7. The Sims: Hot Date Expansion (EA)
8. Diablo II (Vivendi)
9. Sim Theme Park (EA)
10. Age of Empires II: Age of Kings (Microsoft)

PC GAME SALES GROWTH



EXTENDED PLAY
HOMEBREW

By T.S. Eyrich Raboy

Homebrews of the Year!

It's Game of the Year time, and considering that I probably played mods, freeware, and shareware more often than I did commercial games last year, it's only fitting to dish out awards to the games and add-ons that consumed the majority of my time.

Best Multiplayer Mod: *Day of Defeat*
Runners-up: *Marathon Rampancy (Unreal Tournament)*, *Urban Terror (Quake III)*
After hundreds of hours of play, I'm convinced that this WWII *Half-Life* mod is the best multiplayer mod I've ever come across. Axis and Allied teams are balanced superbly, and handle snipers extremely well. The maps are among the best team-play levels ever, all have excellent sniper hides, multiple routes, and plenty of cover to hunker behind as you reload or wait for a grenade to blow. This is a game in which you must rely on your ears as much as on your eyes, listening for snipers, movement, and the faint clank of a grenade bouncing into your position. The latest build, 2.0, added more balance, better graphics, and more realism. It's a better experience for free—you can't beat that.

Best Single-Player Mod: *Poke646*
Runners-up: *Azure Sheep (Half-Life)*, *The Darkest Day (Baldur's Gate II)*
Plenty of good *Half-Life* single-player mods appeared this year, but the most polished by far is *Poke646*. This add-on is commercial quality in every way, with a completely revised weapon set, beautiful new hi-res textures, and clever puzzles. Throw in a plot that incorporates *Half-Life*'s storyline without making us trudge through Black Mesa again, and you get the best single-player mod this side of a Nell Manke episode.

Best Online Diversion: Tie Between *Bejeweled* and *Kung Fu Chess*
PopCap now owns the gem *Diamond Mine*, but it's still the same beloved *Bejeweled* that became the most revolutionary action-puzzle game since *Tetris*. If you want an even more cerebral challenge that will keep your reflexes on edge, give *Kung Fu Chess* a shot. You can move as many pieces as you like whenever you like, but you must wait until a timer counts down before you can send a piece veering off in another direction, leaving you vulnerable to counterattacks. But you can quickly slide a piece out of danger at the last second, which lets you draw opponents into elaborate traps.

If you need to escape the daily grind, come to Best Buy. You'll find tons of games and you can play all you want. Which beats working through lunch.

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Turn On the Fun

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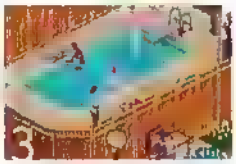
RANKINGS

CGW Top 20

Harry Potter's magic proves stronger than even B.J. Blazcowicz's boots

Harry Potter + Christmas = Money

A virtual *Hot Date* still beats a real-life rejection.



The Sims has probably infected more PCs than the "I love you" virus.

Rank	Last Month	Game	Rating
1	2	Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone ($28, Electronic Arts)	★★★½☆
2	1	The Sims: Hot Date Expansion Pack ($27, Electronic Arts)	★★★★½
3	3	The Sims ($40, Electronic Arts)	★★★★★
4	5	Roller Coaster Tycoon ($21, Infogrames)	★★★★☆
5		EverQuest: Shadows of Luclin ($28, Sony)	★★★★☆
6	4	Backyard Basketball ($18, Infogrames)	NR
7		Return to Castle Wolfenstein ($57, Activision)	★★★½☆
8	7	Zoo Tycoon ($28, Microsoft)	★★★½☆
9	10	Survivor: The Interactive Game ($18, Infogrames)	★½☆☆☆
10	8	Backyard Football 2002 ($18, Infogrames)	★★★★☆
11	6	Sid Meier's Civilization III ($45, Infogrames)	★★★★★
12	14	The Sims: House Party Expansion Pack ($28 Electronic Arts)	★★★★½
13	13	The Sims: Livin' Large Expansion Pack ($27, Electronic Arts)	★★★★½
14	15	Empire Earth ($48, Vivendi Universal)	★★★★☆
15	16	Roller Coaster Tycoon Loopy Landscapes Expansion Pack ($19, Infogrames)	★★★★☆
16	9	Bob the Builder: Can We Fix It ($16, THQ)	NR
17	17	Sim Theme Park ($19, Electronic Arts)	★★★★☆
18	-	Sim City 3000 Unlimited ($28, Electronic Arts)	★★★½☆
19	18	Backyard Baseball 2001 ($19, Infogrames)	★★★★½
20	-	Madden NFL 2002 ($37, Electronic Arts)	★★★½☆

December 2001 retail sales results by NPD Intelect

Gettin' some action just got a whole lot easier.

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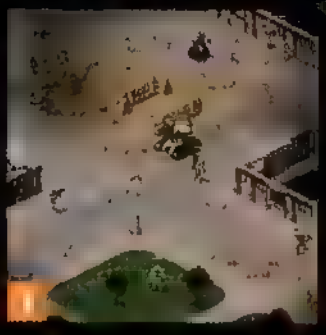
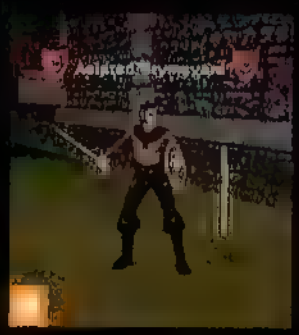
PIPELINE

Our latest guesses about when those games are finally shipping





Estimating software release dates is like trying to predict the next outrage to come out of the Enron scandal. These dates represent the best info we had at press time. If you're a publisher, send us your updates at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com. If you're an Enron executive, go straight to hell.

LASER SQUAD NEMESIS Just what are the *X-COM/Dreamland Chronicles* guys up to nowadays? Now that *Dreamland Chronicles* is being finished by a different developer, the creator of *X-COM*, Julian Gollop, is working with a new company on *Laser Squad Nemesis*, a descendant of the original *Laser Squad*. Mixing in elements of both *Laser Squad* and *X-COM*, the game will focus on squad-level, tactical combat that can be played in email turns. The game is entering a closed beta at press time, and is well on its way to make a winter release via www.lasersquadnemesis.com.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS Now that Infogrames has picked this up, development keeps rolling forward. Issues such as compatibility with low-end machines, patching, spell effects, and toolsets are the main areas of focus. Co-lead designer Rob Bartel commented online, "It's starting to feel like an actual game." Bioware is still steamrolling ahead, saying that the game will be able to hit its target of a summer release date.

GORE Remember that Homebrew column about an independent first-person shooter called *Gore*? Well, the team got a publisher: DreamCatcher, the same outfit that published *Schizm*, *Dune*, and other adventure games. Looks like DreamCatcher is branching out to other genres besides adventure. Expect *Gore* to ship sometime this spring.

SHADOWBANE It's reached a key milestone: closed beta. Two years of design and play-balancing are now being put to the test, as gamers of all stripes get their chance to play it. Hopefully the closed beta will be followed by an open one in the coming months.

Age of Mythology	Microsoft	Sept 2002
Age of Wonders II: The Wizard's Throne	Take Two	Spring 2002
Arx Fatalis	Fishtank Interactive	Summer 2002
Asheron's Call 2	Microsoft	Winter 2002
Beam Breakers	Fishtank Interactive	Summer 2002
Boneworks	Okama	Summer 2002
Call of Cthulhu	Fishtank Interactive	Summer 2002
Chaser	Fishtank Interactive	Winter 2002
Combat Mission 2: Barbarossa to Berlin	Big Time Software	Spring 2002
Commander Jill	Stardock	Spring 2002
Dominant	JoWood	Spring 2002
Counter-Strike: Condition Zero	Sierra	Spring 2002
Deus Ex 2	Eidos	Summer 2002
Doom III	id Software	Eventually
Dragon Empires	Codemasters	Spring 2002
Dragon's Lair 3D	Blue Byte	On hold
Duke Nukem Forever	3D Realms	Spring 2002
Dungeon Siege	Microsoft	April 2002
Earth and Beyond	Westwood	Spring 2002
The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind	Bethesda	Summer 2002
Far West	JoWood	Spring 2002
Freedom Force	Crave	Spring 2002
Galactic Civilizations	Stardock	Fall 2002

IGI Combat	Freedom Games Inc.	Feb 2002
Global Operations	Crave	Spring 2002
Gore	DreamCatcher	Spring 2002
Halo	Microsoft	Summer 2002
Heroes of Might and Magic IV	3DO	March 2002
Hidden & Dangerous 2	Take Two	Spring 2002
Hitman 2: Silent Assassin	Eidos	Spring 2002
Hotel Tycoon	JoWood	Spring 2002
Imperium Galactica 3: Genesis	GOY	Spring 2002
Impossible Creatures	Microsoft	Summer 2002
Industry Tycoon 2	JoWood	Spring 2002
Laser Squad Nemesis	Codo Games	Winter 2002
Legends of Loch Ness	DreamCatcher	Spring 2002
Lineage 2	Destination Games	Spring 2003
Lock On: Modern Air Combat	Ubi Soft	Spring 2002
Master of Orion III	Infogrames	Spring 2002
Medieval: Total War	Activision	Summer 2002
Midgard	Funcom	On hold
Might and Magic IX: Writ of Fate	3DO	Summer 2002
Natural Resistance	JoWood	Spring 2002
Nexagon	GOY	Spring 2002
Neverwinter Nights	Infogrames	Summer 2002
Nexagon: The Pit	Strategy First	Spring 2002
Outcast II: The Lost Paradise	No publisher yet	Winter 2002

Planetside	Sony Online Ent.	Fall 2002
Project IGI 2	Codemasters	Summer 2002
Quake IV	Activision	Someday
Reality Deathmatch	JoWood	Spring 2002
Republic: The Revolution	Eidos	Summer 2002
Shadowbane	Ubi Soft	Spring 2002
Sims Online	EA	Summer 2002
Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix	Activision	Spring 2002
Sovereign	Sony Online Ent.	Someday
Spring Break	Eidos	Spring 2002
Star Trek: Bridge Commander	Activision	March 2002
Star Wars Galaxies	LucasArts	Winter 2002
Star Wars Jedi Outcast: Jedi Knight II	LucasArts	March 2002
Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic	LucasArts	Fall 2002
Tabula Rasa	Destination Games	Summer 2003
Team Fortress 2	Sierra	Spring 2003
Thief III	Eidos	Summer 2002
UFO: Freedom Ridge	Virgin Interactive	Christmas 2002
Unreal II	Infogrames	Spring 2002
Unreal Tournament II	Infogrames	Fall 2002
WarCraft III	Blizzard	Spring 2002
Warlords IV	Ubi Soft	Summer 2002
Warlords Battlecry II	Ubi Soft	March 2002
World of WarCraft	Blizzard	Eventually

NEW UPDATE

"Dad, where is Afghanistan?"

"Level 4, son."

TACTICAL OPS™
ASSAULT ON TERROR

RP Visit www.esrb.org or call 1-800-771-3772 for Rating Information

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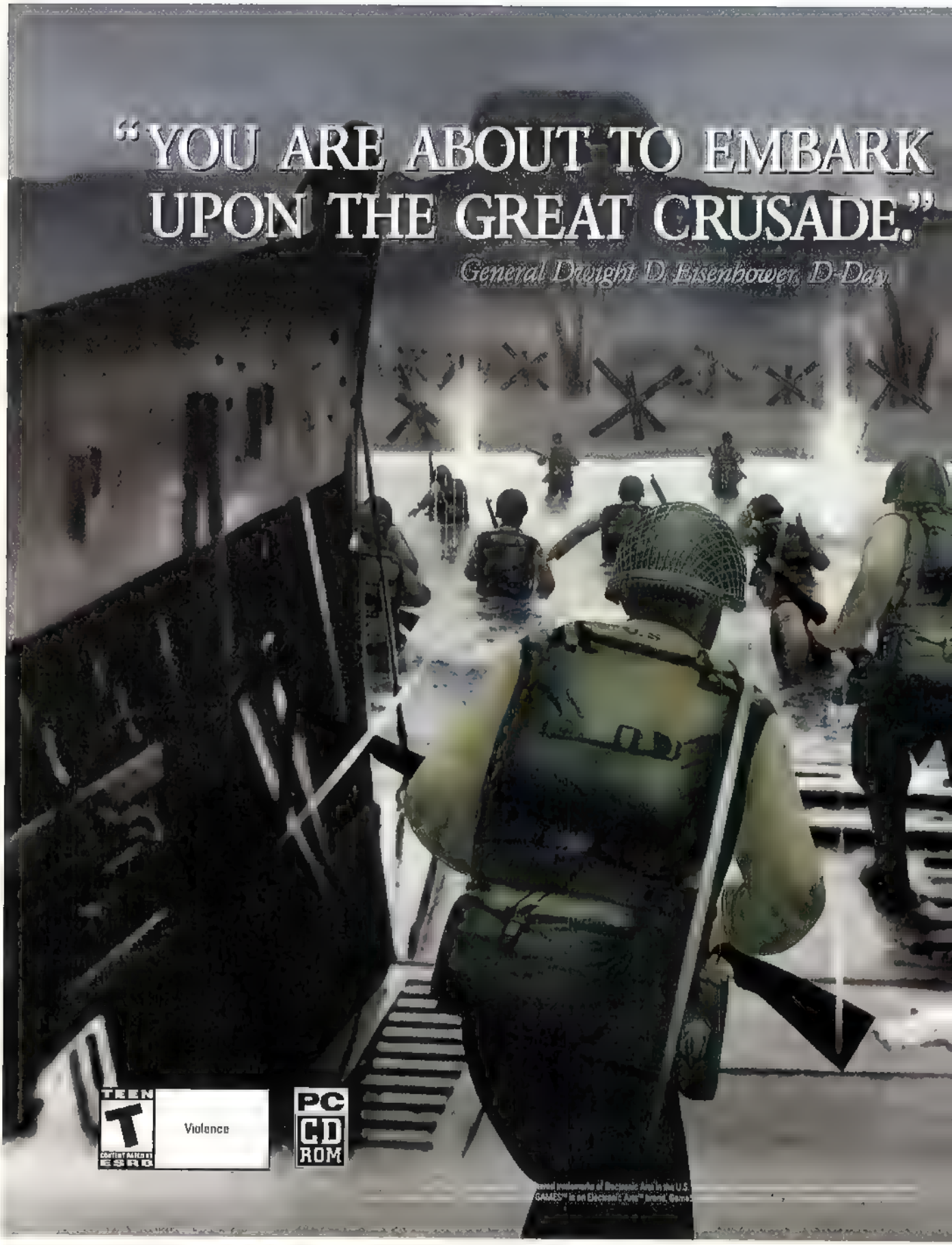
KATHERAN

MICROPROSE


"YOU ARE ABOUT TO EMBARK UPON THE GREAT CRUSADE."
General Dwight D. Eisenhower, D-Day
TEEN
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PC
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gamespy
Best of
E3

Action
EA GAMES
EAGAMES.COM
YOUR COMMANDER'S words hang like a promise of victory over the roar of Nazi mortar rounds pounding the ocean around your Higgins boat. Normandy is just a thin slice of color in the gun slot. Then with a crash, the ramp falls away into the hell that is Omaha Beach. Swallowed by surf, sand, noise, fear and fallen comrades you abandon your sense of reality and fight for your life. Step into the boots of Lt. Mike Powell and sign on for six campaigns and eighteen missions stretching from Africa to Norway. But while you search for the courage remember, the battle rages on.
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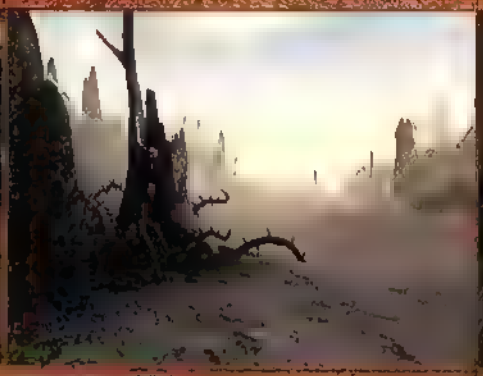
Best RPG of E3
Computer Gaming World



Best of E3 - RPG
Game Revolution

Top 20 Games of E3
GameSpot

* **The sequel to Arena and Daggerfall,** the award-winning 1994 and 1996 RPGs of the Year.

* **Live another life.** Play any character you can imagine, from the heroic warrior to the secret assassin.

* **Explore another world.** The enormous game world is open and free for you to discover. Go anywhere you want and do anything you want.

* **Next generation technology.** Realistic textures and objects, incredible polygon counts, and advanced weather systems truly take you to another world.

* **Choose your friends.** Involve yourself in guild politics and a huge variety of quests. Thousands of characters remember you and your actions.

* **Download new adventures.** Included with the PC version is "The Elder Scrolls Construction Set". Create, share, and download new characters, dungeons, quests and more.

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PC CD ROM

XBOX

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Violence

All screenshots from PC version.

#1 Xbox Game of E3
Gamesmania

Finalist, Best RPG of Show
Official E3 Awards

Elder Scrolls Series
GameSpy Hall of Fame

The Elder Scrolls III
MORROWIND™

www.elderscrolls.com

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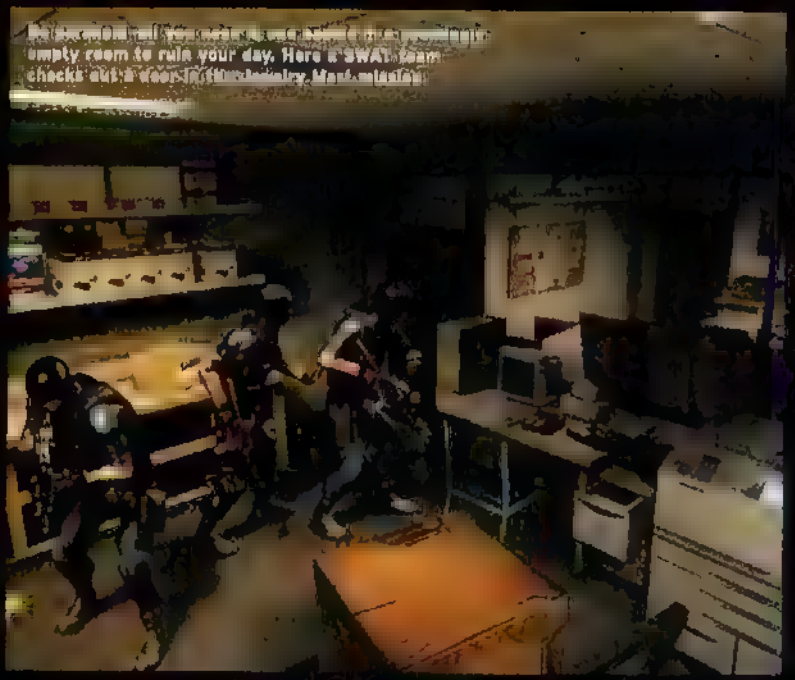
. Never go alone or undergunned. A pair of SWAT officers makes a gang member kiss asphalt in the Crosstown mission.



[illegible] empty room to ruin your day. Here a SWAT team checks out a door in the Jewelry Mart mission.

Bright lights, dark places. The team stalks in the Neon Art Museum.

A gang member [illegible] for his [illegible] break him free from these luxurious accommodations.

SWAT4: URB

Peace through superior firepower...and teamwork. *SWAT4* puts you at the center of

AN JUSTICE

a gang-infested future L.A.

By V. Long

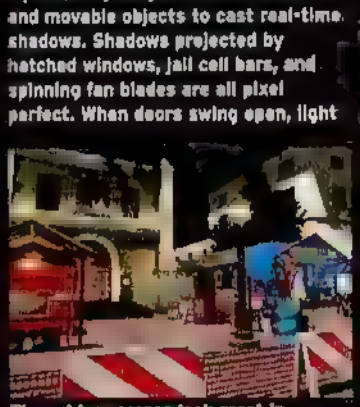
Gamers are treated to a whole new level of replayability with tools to edit the missions.

With *SWAT4: Urban Justice*, Sierra goes far beyond just building upon the success of *SWAT3*. In fact, Sierra completely rebuilt the technology and vastly enhanced the design and gameplay as well. Although the heroic theme of the *SWAT* series lives on, *SWAT4* projects a much more youthful and progressive energy—you can even hear it in the music.

SWAT4 revolves around the ugly cycle of retribution among several gangs in 2006 Los Angeles. Movie sequences set up the game's 16 missions so you don't have to sit through the preassault briefings. The missions are more challenging than your ordinary good-versus-bad shootout, especially when gang violence breaks out in public places and you must protect innocent bystanders or rescue hostages while apprehending uncooperative gang members.

SWAT4 is based on a fictional vision of the LAPD SWAT team, as the game uses tactics that are not "officially" deployed by the real LAPD. However, Sierra took great pains to ensure that the combat tactics were technically sound. What you see in *SWAT4* is what real operators do. This game is certainly not *Max Payne* or Hollywood.

The rendering engine was rebuilt from scratch for this version. The new lighting system creates richer outdoor and indoor scenes by using a hybrid of dynamic lighting and light-maps. Dynamic lighting allows characters and movable objects to cast real-time shadows. Shadows projected by hatched windows, jail cell bars, and spinning fan blades are all pixel perfect. When doors swing open, light spills into the darkness. Subtle changes in lighting and noise provide cues to which the characters will react. The characters' heads will also track the perceived threat. Skeletal-based animations will allow faces to reflect emotions such as anger and surprise.



The outdoor scenes look great in *SWAT4*'s new rendering engine.

An enforcer and protector clear a room at the American Music Company's studios. Notice the shadows cast by the characters and objects.

The *SWAT4* environment provides more interactivity than *SWAT3*'s. You can climb ladders and operate elevators. Glass can be shattered and doors can be splintered. Many objects can be moved and manipulated via *SWAT4*'s grip system. And in addition to fully configurable firearms, other goodies such as wedges, radios, booby traps, and surveillance cameras spice up gameplay.

Extensive motion-capture provides the characters with a whole new repertoire of realistic actions, such as crawling, climbing, dragging, grappling, and butting. The characters have 32 hit-specific points that can trigger appropriate animations. In career mode, a thigh wound will be reflected in later missions as a gimpy gait until it heals.

The AI promises to be impressive. Each team can have several "trailers," which are NPCs that you can instruct to provide suppressive fire, cover your rear, or even drag out the wounded. Making use of these characters and working as a cohesive team is the single biggest key to success in this game.

SWAT4's Jump Start mode allows impatient newcomers to throw themselves into the action, bypassing the configuration that *SWAT3* required. Gamers are also treated to greater replay value, thanks to tools for editing entities, missions, and campaigns.

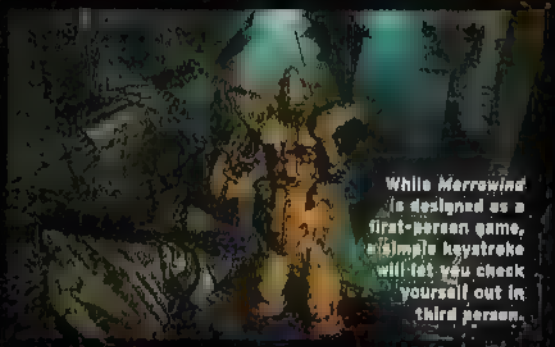
The numerous multiplayer modes allow up to 24 simultaneous players, with teams of up to 10 players. Multiplayer allows you to play bad guys as well as hostages.

Stay tuned for more details as we approach *SWAT4*'s fourth-quarter 2002 release.

GAME STATS

PUBLISHER: Sierra On-Line DEVELOPER: Sierra On-Line
URL: www.swatuj.com RELEASE DATE: Q4 2002

The gaunt Ashlander, the bleak landscape, the meager shelter are all indicative of the gameworld's visual coherence.



While *Morrowind* is designed as a first-person game, a simple keystroke will let you check yourself out in third person.

This Dwarf's ruin looks cool, but check out that axe! Who wouldn't like to hack up some monster with that bastard?

THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

Don't let its tidiness fool you–this is the biggest RPG world ever By Robert Coffey

Let's get this out there right away: I hated *The Elder Scrolls: Daggerfall*. The enormous, meandering, impossible-not-to-get-lost-in random dungeons absolutely killed that game for me. That said, I cannot wait to play *Morrowind*. While the early alpha version I tooled around in was far from complete, it whetted my appetite for what is almost inarguably the largest, deepest RPG slated for 2002.

Nowhere is that more obvious than in the graphics. The real-time shadows and day-night cycle add a layer of believability lacking in most RPGs, but it's the sense of culture in each region that really makes the world. Traveling through Tamriel (often upon the game's giant insect Stilt Strider transport system), I was struck by how organic the architecture looks–none of the usual, "slap a right-angled building on the ground" crap here. The scenery varies from region to region and yet manages to hold together as a whole.

Morrowind's level of detail is dramatic. The faces of the character models are remarkably lifelike, exceeded in quality only by the knotted and pitted textures of armor in the game. But the most welcome detail comes in the game's dungeons. No longer will Bethesda's flagship franchise suffer from the alienation of *Daggerfall*'s needlessly convoluted, randomly generated time traps. Instead, the bulk of the *Morrowind* dungeons will be hard coded and handcrafted, making for more focused jaunts, forays that in some instances can be completed in less than 30 minutes of playing.

But don't get the impression that *Morrowind* is going to be a high-speed blitz through some half-baked RPG lite. From the beginning, you're plunged into the depth and the history of the gameworld by answering a series of classic *Elder Scrolls* questions to determine your character. Conversation with all the NPCs in the game is deep and rich, without the bogged-down feeling you can get in needlessly wordy RPGs. Still, there are a lot of words, and thankfully *Morrowind* features a great hypertext conversation/quest log that puts to shame the legs of other games.

Unfortunately, the game was still in need of some serious balancing when I played it, so it's difficult to report with authority on how the combat system feels. But there was no denying the warm glow of achievement I felt when the skills-based character development system notified me that my sword skill had gone up while I was whacking away on a guard who had the temerity to arrest me for killing an innocent man in the street.

As promising as *Morrowind* appears, it's got a way to go before completion, and getting it in a workable state is going to be no mean feat. Bethesda is promising a spring release–here's hoping they wait until it's actually ready, probably mid- to late summer.

GAME STATS

PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks DEVELOPER: Bethesda Softworks URL: www.bethsoft.com
GENRE: Role-playing RELEASE DATE: Q2 2002

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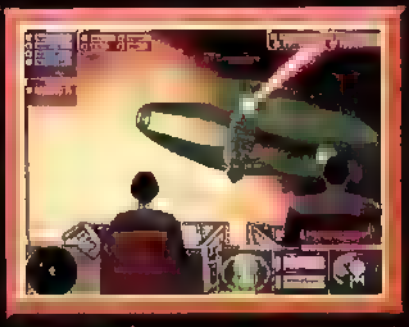

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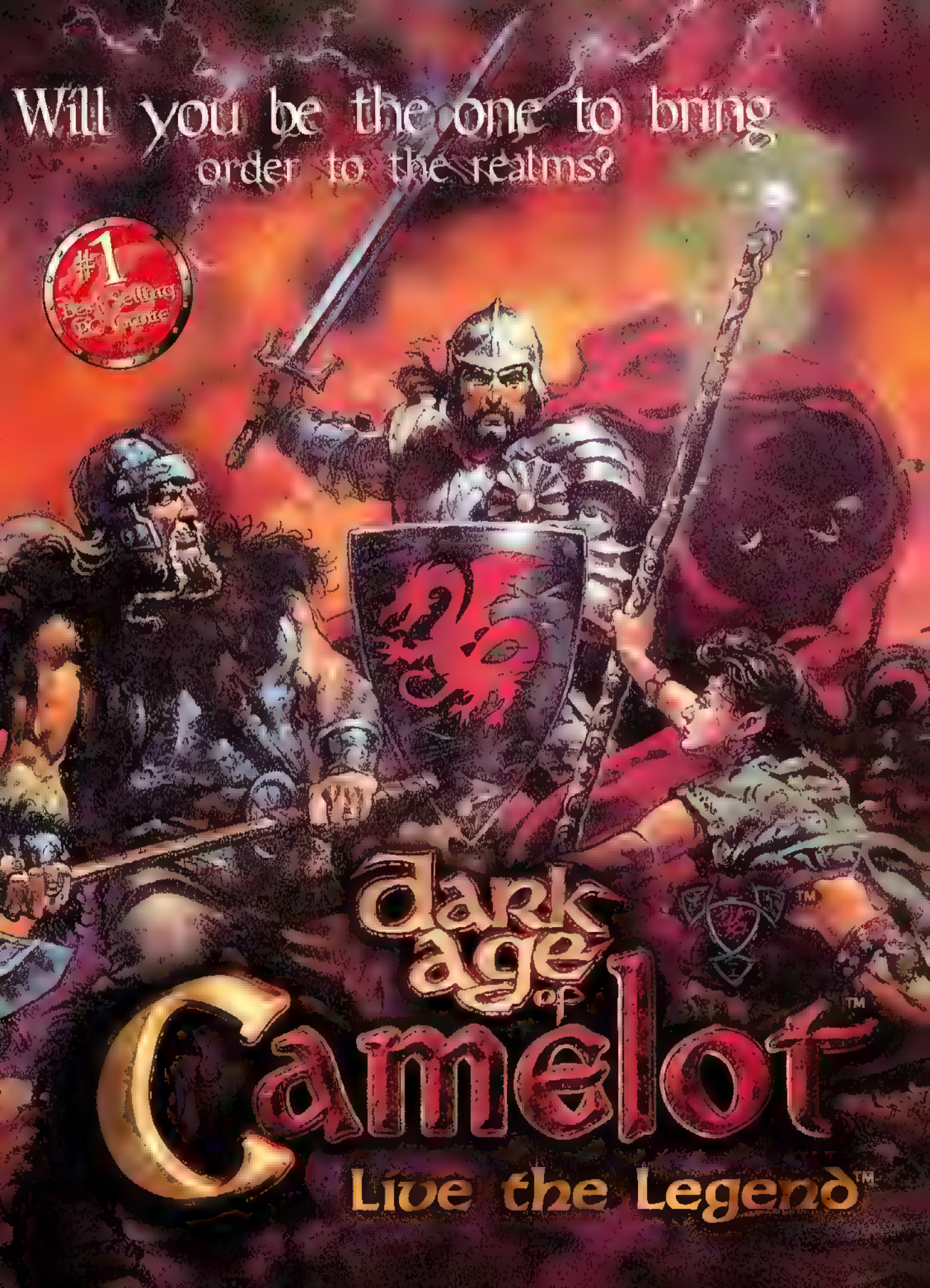
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EXCLUSIVE!

Cate Archer is back with new weapons, new bad guys, and spruced-up AI that's, well, to die for.

no one lives forever 2

By William O'Neal

The opportunity to create a sequel to a wildly popular and successful game is a luxury many game developers could only hope for. Upon proving oneself, everything should be easier: getting funding, setting realistic milestones, and grabbing the attention of the journalistic hype machine that's just waiting to gush over another of your multimedia masterpieces. ❊ ❊ ❊ Then again, as I heard from multiple people when I visited Kirkland, Washington-based Monolith Productions, "We don't want this to turn into another *Tomb Raider* franchise."

Alas, success can lead to complacency and the dreaded case of development-by-rote that has befallen Lara Croft's once-great series. Monolith hopes that with *NOLF 2*, they don't fall into this trap. Instead, they want to develop a title that lives up to the expectations created by its predecessor while making a game that is, for all intents and purposes, better than the original. ❊ ❊ ❊ Fire up GameSpy and look at the games being played online, and one thing is abundantly clear: While the original *NOLF* was widely lauded by gamers, they aren't playing it online. People enjoyed *NOLF* because of its good story and the challenging and entertaining AI opponents. Monolith knows this, and accordingly they're spending a lot of time working on the AI, ensuring that players will once again be entertained and challenged. ❊ ❊ ❊ "We've taken a different approach with *NOLF 2* than we did with the original *NOLF*," says Craig Hubbard, creative director at Monolith Productions and *NOLF 2* lead designer. He adds, "We tried to design things so that instead of scripting everything specifically, we'd give the AI cues about how to understand the environment. The player knows what they need to do, we just wanted to open things up more and give them a wider range of options as far as how to do it." To that end, the game's myriad environments are designed with hints for the AI so that, in Hubbard's words, "We were just able to let the AI go." ❊ ❊ ❊ In addition to sprucing up the AI something fierce, Monolith is attempting to focus the game more on stealth, and to make being stealthy more fun and intuitive than it was in the first game. Hubbard says, "We've added the concept of hiding places, when you come near one, you'll get a little indicator, in this case a capital H, that lets you know that 'you can hide here.' "

ENTER THE DRAGONESS

In one of *NOLF 2*'s opening levels, Cate will have to sneak into a quaint Japanese town to photograph a meeting between a couple of nasty characters. How difficult could a photography assignment be? Well, the place is being guarded by ninjas and you'll enter the complex armed only with a taser. Along with a bevy of crossbows, swords, and throwing stars at their disposal, the ninjas also have smoke bombs that enable them to disappear, *Half-Life* style, in a swirl of leaves and smoke, only to reappear ready to take you out.

Me-rowl Along with compacts that can decode secret messages and unlock doors, Cate will also have at her disposal a deadly exploding kitty. Take that Aibo!

It won't be just ducking behind obstacles. The H will appear and flash, and only when it stops flashing are you concealed. Once you're hidden an AI character can walk right up and won't see you unless you move or make a sound. Speaking of sound, Monolith has ensured that sound will factor very heavily in the gameplay. "Pretty much anything that you can hear, the AI can hear," says Hubbard.

As stealth is so important in *NOLF 2*, being able to access hiding places will be crucial, and in many instances it'll be up to the player. "You can create hiding places by doing things like unscrewing light bulbs or breaking them," says Hubbard. "Breaking them makes a lot of noise, though, while unscrewing them takes time. You can also go into a room and turn the light off in order to create a hiding place, but if an AI comes into the room because they heard a sound, they'll turn the light on."

Cate Archer Is Back

The game begins with Cate Archer in Japan, and her objective is to sneak into a village and photograph a meeting between two shady characters. With evil ninjas patrolling the area, she'll be armed with a nonlethal taser. You'll immediately appreciate the importance of stealth. "You start off the game with a taser that won't kill anyone, but it can knock the AI out, and they'll wake up after a while, so you have to be careful," comments Hubbard. "[Nearly] anything in the environment can create noise, so you can activate stuff or accidentally bump into something and the AI will hear it."

After knocking enemies out, you can search them to get various things, including weapons, ammo, and sometimes intelligence items. Other games will blithely ignore fallen enemies, but not *NOLF 2*. Says Hubbard, "When the AI sees someone lying on the ground, they'll always try to wake them up. First they'll assume they're sleeping, but if the person doesn't wake up, then they'll sound an alarm. If the person doesn't react then, they'll check the pulse like they did in *NOLF* or they'll try to kick them awake—whatever's appropriate for their character type."

While Monolith will encourage stealth, they're

trying to ensure that it won't be the only way to successfully complete a mission. "We're trying to get rid of mission failures," says Hubbard. "While we were working on *NOLF*, I was playing several different games in one there was always an easy way to recover, and that was a lot of fun. In the other, the minute you were seen, it was over." Prior to beginning *NOLF 2*, Monolith researched reviews about *NOLF* and read forums in an attempt to find out what gamers liked and disliked. Hubbard wasn't alone: Many people were put off by the fact that, in the first game, it was often too difficult to escape from guards once you were spotted. In *NOLF 2*, there are now multiple levels of alertness. Leaving dead or otherwise incapacitated enemies lying around builds up AI awareness, rather than simply switching it on. "Initially an AI will just be on alert and can be surprised pretty easily, but once they've heard a disturbance they'll investigate it," Hubbard says. "There are different levels of disturbances, a bottle falling over or a dog barking will cause someone to come over and check it out, but if they find a body or hear a gunshot, then they'll start searching the area. Once again we've provided them with cues about where to look, for instance where hiding places may be."

AI That's Actually Intelligent

Another complaint that Monolith heard about *NOLF* was that it was too linear. With that in mind, they've designed *NOLF 2* so that each mission will have not only primary objectives, but secondary and tertiary objectives as well. Secondary mission objectives may or may not be necessary for completion, but they'll help you gain experience points. Hubbard says, "In *NOLF* we had an experience system and attributes

NOLF 2 is achieving frame-rates that are at least twice as fast as _NOLF_'s.

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that would improve over the game, but you didn't have any control over that. This time around we've exposed it so you can customize yourself as you play. As you complete objectives, you'll earn skill points that you can assign." Usually the secondary objectives will be risky, but Monolith tells us that the rewards will be high. Furthermore, there will often be rewards if you complete an objective without killing anyone, just to encourage stealth.

In a further attempt to avoid linearity, Monolith is moving away from scripted scenarios; with AI that is capable of wandering the world, they're making sure that each mission will contain multiple paths to success. It also means that playing levels multiple times will yield completely different experiences. According to Hubbard, "In *NOLF* one of the problems was that you could lose AI, but it was very difficult. So we made it easier this time. Whenever an AI arrives at a junction, they'll have to make a decision about which way they're going to search. And we can weight those decisions. Obviously we know what we would do if we were them, so we can weight it so they'll be more likely to go this way, but they may go the other way. If you play it multiple times, it'll be different each time."

This also means that players can toy with and even trick the AI. For instance, let's say you open a door or a filing cabinet; AI knows it's supposed to be closed, so when they come into the room they'll react. Furthermore, there will be scenarios in which the player has to sneak around because they're badly armed and the AI is heavily armed. In these situations, opening doors and creating diversions will help you avoid confrontation. On the flip side, there will be times when you need to search through filing cabinets; failing to clean up afterwards will heighten the AI's awareness, thereby causing more problems for you. Adds Hubbard, "We wanted to open it up and give the player more opportunities to decide how to tackle a problem. They know what they need to do, so it's a matter of them deciding how they want to do it."

Behold the LithTech Engine

NOLF 2 continues to impress on the technological front as well. According to Kevin Stephens, director of engineering at Monolith Productions, "*NOLF* used the same rendering engine as *Shogo*, which came out about a month before *Half-Life*, so that kind of dates it." With that in mind Monolith completely rewrote the renderer for *NOLF 2*. In other words, *NOLF 2* is pushing at least 20 times more polys than *NOLF*, while achieving frame-rates that are at least twice as fast.

Because *NOLF* had such a wide appeal, there's an added challenge in designing *NOLF 2*. Everyone wants to create games that take advantage of all that modern technology has to offer, but it's important for designers to realize that not everyone has a 2GHz system with a GeForce3Ti card in it. Kevin Stephens says, "Some companies say, 'We're only going to run on a GeForce3.' Like id. And that's great for them. They can push technology and do their thing. But *NOLF* is a game that has a broad appeal, and we can't ignore the market. We can't build our game just for the elite hardware owners." Monolith is aided in this regard by the LithTech engine's ability to scale for different machines. *NOLF 2* will be able to run on a low-end machine, but on high-end ones it will run faster, and everything, including the game's newly designed fire and water effects, will look better. While Monolith understands that technology is important, they're constantly reminding themselves that story is king, and that, in the words of Kevin Stephens, "Our approach on the technology side is not to get in the way of the content."

What About My Buddies?

Monolith recognizes that *NOLF* isn't terribly popular among the online community, but they're hoping to create multiplayer modes in *NOLF 2* that will change that situation. While the game will sport standard deathmatch, the designers are also creating a cooperative multiplayer mode that will allow groups to play together against the AI. You won't be playing the single player game with a friend, though. Because *NOLF 2* is so story-based, Monolith believes that the single-player game won't provide a compelling multiplayer experience, so they're creating special cooperative missions that can be completed only if you're working with a buddy.

When Can You Play?

NOLF 2 is scheduled to ship for the 2002 holiday season, and with Monolith's track record for actually releasing games on time, we're confident that you'll be playing this game by Christmas. And it looks to be a worthy sequel. Hubbard summarizes, "It's a game that's been designed with the spirit of *NOLF*, but we didn't want to make *Tomb Raider 2*. We wanted to take the strengths and build a game around those strengths, and shore up all the weaknesses.' From what we've seen, they're well on their way to achieving that goal.

Right: Because the Russians have you outgunned and outnumbered, stealth will be an important skill during the Siberian mission.

Below: Each of *NOLF 2*'s locations will have distinct architecture. Here we're in India. Look closely and you may see Sarita Choudhury and Denzel Washington in a window.

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Dell | Solutions

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- Lexmark X83 All-in-One Print Center that Scans, Prints and Copies, $199
- HP Office Jet k80, $299

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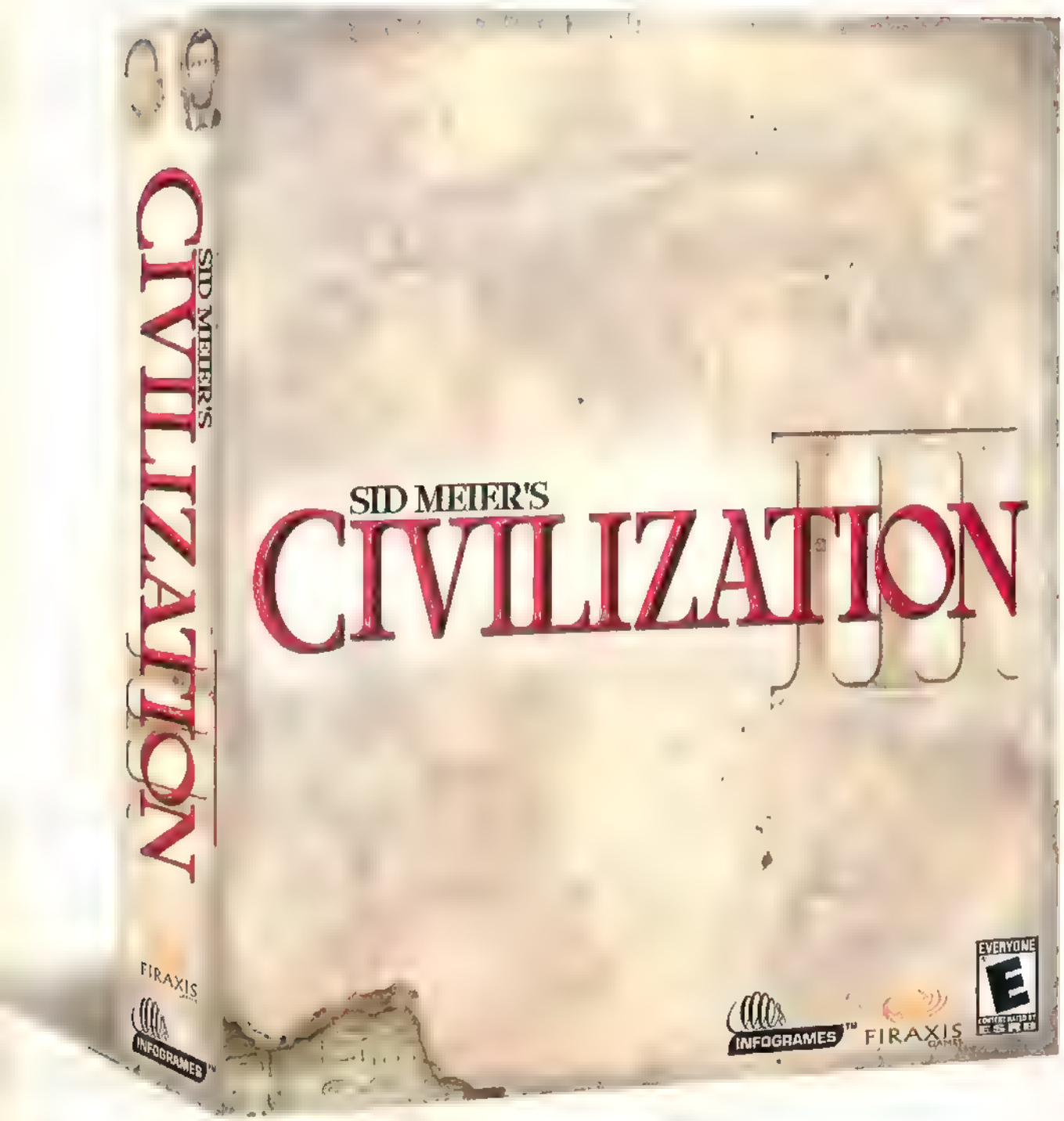

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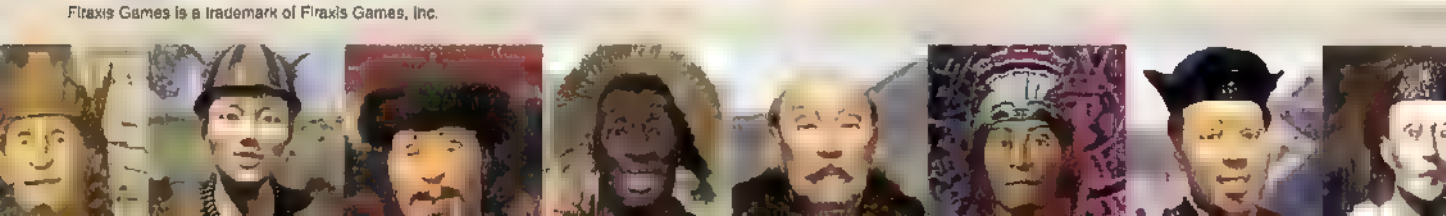

"Hello Civ III, goodbye girlfriend, goodbye job, goodbye life."
Computer Gaming World

★★★★★
Computer Gaming World

"Civilization III brings great turn-based strategy gaming back to life with its solid design, sleek interface, sharp artwork, unlimited replayability, open architecture, and epic storytelling."
GameSpot.com

GAME OF THE YEAR

"What can I say except 'bravo!'"
GameVisions.com

"... this is the Civilization that we've been waiting for."
Game Informer

COMPUTER GAMES MAGAZINE

"To make a long story short, Civilization III is a worthy heir for the franchise and a definite must have for any strategy gamer who doesn't want us to make fun of them."
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"History has never been so addictive."
Time Magazine

★★★★★
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4.5 / 5

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

MATURE M

Blood Violence

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Cao Cao had become so arrogant after a series of quick victories that he completely underestimated his rivals. He suffered a huge defeat even though his troops greatly outnumbered the opposing forces and he had lost his precious opportunity to seize the whole realm.

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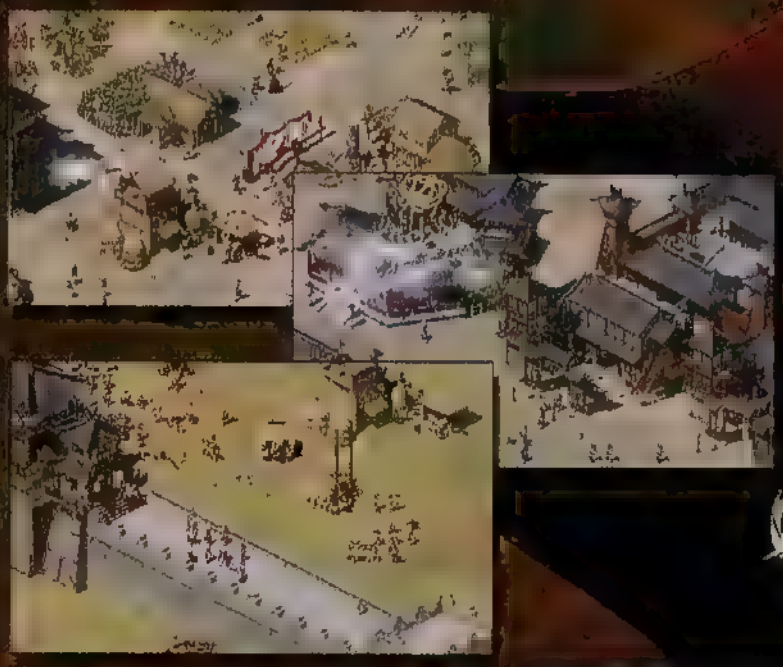
- Unique Profession-Transference system allowing you to go from Laborer to Sergeant and back if needed.

General Cao Cao



DRAGON THRONE

三國

BATTLE OF RED CLIFFS

object SOFTWARE

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TEEN T

Blood
Violence

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Games of the Year

The Very Best of a (Sometimes) Great Year in Gaming

We could try to paint a rosy picture.

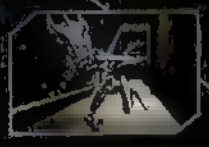
We could put on our happy faces and do our little happy dance for you. We could tell you that everything's great and that this was the BEST YEAR EVER for computer games! But would you respect us in the morning?

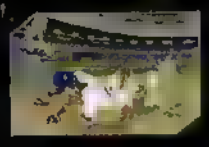
So let's say this: 2001 sucked. Yes, there were some awesome games, and yes, there were some big sellers, but between the dot-com crash and the console hype, hardly a day seemed to go by all year when PC gamers didn't get a giant knee to the collective groin.

If there was one symbolic event, it was Microsoft's decision to release *Halo* for the Xbox only. Here we have the company most closely associated with the PC, yanking away the year's most anticipated PC game. (Yeah, sure it's going to be ported—we'll believe it when we see it.) If even Microsoft is setting its gaze elsewhere, what's to stop everyone else? In fact, most of the big guys *did* let us down, either by chasing console dollars or by releasing their games too early—or not at all—or by closing their doors completely.

Fortunately, it wasn't all bad. Not remotely. Many of this year's best games just came from new and unexpected places. We needed new blood. We needed fresh voices and idealistic designers who weren't afraid to make their labors of love, market research be damned. So here's to this year's winners—all fantastic games, all worthy winners in any year. 2001 sucked, but these games helped us survive it.

By the Editors of *Computer Gaming World*





Your squad waits in formation for your orders.

GAME OF THE YEAR

Operation Flash

PUBLISHED BY CODEMASTERS DEVELOPED BY BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE

If there's a Cinderella story in computer gaming this year, it's got to be *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis*. For a game that barely registered on our collective *CGW* radar at the beginning of 2001 to wind up winning our overall Game of the Year award is nothing short of amazing.

Set in 1985, *Flashpoint* tells the story of a fictional but highly believable confrontation in a generic Eastern European nation between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. that threatens to spiral out of control into World War III. As you progress through the campaign, you alternate among three characters: an infantryman, a tank crewman, and a pilot. The action, especially in first person-shooter mode, plays like a faster-paced tactical sim (e.g. *Rainbow Six*). But the dedication to spot-on realism really drives the visceral tension up a notch.

Operation Flashpoint delivers on what we've been saying computer games were capable of all this time.

Things started buzzing when the demo, released mid-March, quickly became so popular that people started hacking it to build their own missions. When we finally got to taste the full European version in June, we knew we were onto something, and by the time the American version (v. 1.2) was released at the end of August, it was pretty clear that a bona fide Game of the Year contender had arrived.

Hell, nobody on staff except Scooter even remembered the preview we did back in '97, and that's only because he wrote it. Little did we know that somewhere in what used to be Czechoslovakia, Bohemia Interactive was quietly building one of the most revolutionary games that we would ever play. Revolutionary, but not unexpected. *Operation Flashpoint* delivers on what we've been saying computer

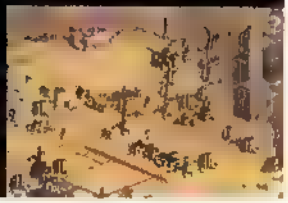
Manning a turret on an APC.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Best Game That Didn't Win an Award

Civilization III

Almost any other year, *Civilization III* is Strategy Game of the Year, if not Game of the Year. But bigger innovators squeezed out this brilliant update to a Hall of Fame classic this year. That said, *Civ III* is easily one of the top three games this year and one no gamer should be without.



point

games were capable of all this time.

Flashpoint's key quality is its open-ended design. Sure, you have the traditional constraints of missions and campaigns, but once you're actually in a mission, the avenues available to you to finish that mission are literally infinite. Vehicles are free to be commandeered, and squadmates reply to complex orders that can include everything from "follow me" and "go over there" to "pick up that weapon" or "get in that gun turret and shoot anything that moves." The beauty of the mission design is that even if it ducts you along a bit from point A to point B by giving you specific orders, the options for following the orders are endless. You can walk, you can drive, and hell, you can even fly.

This is best exemplified in one of the single noncampaign missions. In that mission, you start out in a courtyard with a full squad of 12 soldiers. Your mission is to defend three towns in succession. Surrounding you are myriad vehicles: a couple of tanks, a few APCs, some trucks, and a Humvee or two. You can choose any combination of vehicles—all tanks, trucks with a tank escort—or you can just go on foot. It doesn't matter—the game is yours to create, as long as you accomplish your main objectives.

The excellent squad leader interface allows you to give your troops or vehicles such finely tuned orders that at times the game almost feels like a real time strategy. In fact, *Flashpoint* skirts several genres. On the surface it is a first-person shooter, but peel back the layers and you'll find a pretty hardcore dedication to simulation, the afore mentioned strategy elements, and because of the setting, a believable wargame. *Flashpoint* eschews all of those constricting labels and provides what is best described as a complete gaming experience.

The only serious qualm we had when choosing *Flashpoint* as game of the year came out of concern that the game may be too hardcore for some gamers. Make no mistake, *Flashpoint* is highly challenging. But once again, it's the open game design that makes it all work. No matter how many times a level may kick your butt or seem insurmountable, the endless variety of solutions will keep gamers coming back for more, trying to find the solution that works (although there's never just one). *Flashpoint* has replay value in spades.

The only game to come close to challenging *Operation Flashpoint* for our award this year was the excellent *Civilization III*. In the end we decided to go for the game that was more innovative and more unexpected over the game that was polished and addictive, but was ultimately just the next iteration in a beloved yet familiar franchise.

The real challenge, however, came from a faction of *CGW* editors who didn't want to give a Game of the Year award at all, out of disappointment at the (apparently) losing battle that PC games are fighting against the consoles and at the sorry state of the highly anticipated games that came out this year (*Return to Castle Wolfenstein, Tribes 2* etc.). However, the winning argument in the debate pointed out that few of the category winners were highly hyped behemoths from big developers or publishers. Rather, they were all innovative and unexpected games that showed what PCs can do that consoles still can't (and probably never will). It may have been a bad year to be a big-name PC game developer, but it was a hell of a year to be a gamer.

Past Winners

GAME OF THE YEAR

2000	The Sims (EA)
1999	Unreal Tournament (GT)
1998	Half-Life (Sierra)
1997	Jedi Knight (LucasArts)
1996	Diablo (Blizzard)
1995	Gabriel Knight 2 (Sierra)
1994	X-COM (Microprose)
1993	Doom (id Software)
1992	Links 286 Pro (Access)
1991	Civilization (Microprose)
1990	Wing Commander (Origin)
1989	Railroad Tycoon (Microprose)
1988	SimCity (Maxis)
1987	Empire (Interstel)
1986	Earl Weaver Baseball (EA)
1985	Ultima IV (Origin)
1984	Kampgruffe (SSI)

Tanks for the memories.

Acid-spraying terror straight from the films awaits you.

BEST ACTION GAME

Aliens vs. Predator 2

DEVELOPER: VIVENDI UNIVERSAL DEVELOPER: MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS | NOMINEES: MAX PAYNE · OPERATION FLASHPOINT · SERIOUS SAM · CLIVE BARKER'S UNDYING

The Cold War, Charlie Bronson, headless Croatians, and chest-bursting *naissances*. 2001 was a rare year, being perhaps one of the best years the action genre has seen. Usually, one title just dominates, much as the Cyberdemons of yore did back in the *Doom* days. This year, every nominee was sprinting to the top, but we did manage to narrow it down to just one: *Aliens vs. Predator 2*

Playing all three campaigns is like playing three separate games.

The prize could have easily gone to *Max Payne*, that guilty-pleasure third person shooter with the slickest effect in the genre. We all sat back during the demos thinking, "This bullet-time thing is gonna get old. Will it even help the game?" What we got was a feature that not only made the game as stylish as a John Woo flick choreographed by Yuen Wo-Ping, but also became a necessary tool for winning. Sure, *Max Payne* was on the short side, but did we really need five more hours of vigilante cop justice? *Max Payne*, if anything, hit the sweet spot for length. But the storyline kept teasing us with interesting places, and then ended up in the most mundane and predictable of clichés. The mazes alone were enough to shave off points toward the award.

Operation Flashpoint could have been a shoo-in for this category, no questions asked. If you wanna know why, just read the Game of the Year write-up. But because that game already got the top honors, we decided to give another deserving game in this category some props.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Best Gaming Moment

Aliens vs. Predator 2

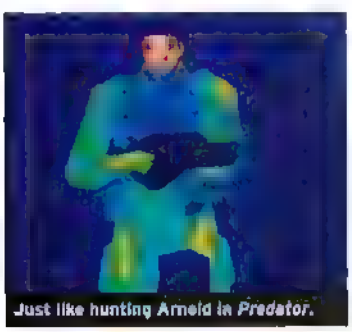
Instead of killing or conquering something, 2001's best gaming moment involved maturation and growth. We're talking about the moment in *Aliens vs. Predator 2* when you, as a fledgling alien chest burster, chew your way through some chump's rib cage and erupt out in oozing postnatal glory. *AvP2* replaced John Hurt as the authoritative source for all your chest-bursting needs.

Serious Sam is a great example of the overall trend among the winners. Little guys making great games. Being nothing more than a brighter version of *Doom*, *Serious Sam* planted tons of "frantic action feeling" into a $20 package. *Serious Sam* takes us away from the dreary space corridors and castles of previous games, plants us in the light-filled deserts of the outdoors, and packs those exteriors with enemies galore. But as much as we like rewarding the little guy, *Serious Sam* misses out on top honors because well, it is just *Doom* for the year 2001.

What sets apart *Aliens vs. Predator 2* s both the intricate plot and the great des gn elements used to portray the three species. Even the stalwart Marine, locked in I rst-person-shooter mode, is given the style characteristic of the *Aliens* lilm, and provides the tension and fright from the best scenes of that film. Hop on over to the predator side, where you can take a slower, more diabolical approach playing the very thing that's hunting your Marine comrades in the Marine campaign. Finally, who could deny the joy of playing the s inky aliens, scurrying from wall to wall and b t.ng the heads off their enemies?

All of this great action design was complemented by the talent of Mono lith's ste lar scriptwriters, who applied the lessons learned from *NOLF* and made tight, interesting dia.ogues and plot points. Monolith deserves praise for ditching the traditional shooter story-telling technique and completely fidd ing with the gamer's sense of time and memory instead. No, the LithTech Talon engine isn't as smooth or polished as either the *Unreal* or *Quake* engines especially when it comes to the netcode, but that doesn't detract from the gameplay. Playing through all three campa gns is like playing three separate games, and who could resist thri ls like using a Marine Exo-Suit, jumping on someone with the predator cloaking device, or snapping at someone with the alien's l.ttle tongue-mouth?

For presenting a fresh way to play a first-person shooter and for making bo d strides in storytelling for shooters, *Aliens vs. Predator 2* easily snatches the title of Action Game of the Year.



Just like hunting Arnold in *Predator*.

Face-hugging (with cannibalism) is the best.

BEST MULTIPLAYER GAME

Aliens vs. Predator 2

VIVENDI UNIVERSAL
MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS

NOMINEES: OPERATION FLASHPOINT • RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN • COUNTER-STRIKE • IL-2 STURMOVIK

We were damn c ose to just giving this award to *Counter-Strike* again. It's so refined and addictive at this point that you can always find a stray *CGW* editor sitt.ng in the lab, CT-ing or terrorizing to his heart's content in cs_dust2 or cs_.taly or whatnot. There were, however, some other notable con-tenders in the category, such as *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* and even *IL-2 Sturmovik*.

Surpr singly, what ended up gr pping the *CGW* editors most was *Aliens vs. Predator 2*. We do think that *RTCW*'s addition to team-based gaming is a noble accomp.ishment (and it worked out of the box), but the other maps didn't quite have the *oomph* that the demo map of the beach assault had. *Sturmovik*'s feature allowing mu t ple crewmembers in one craft sounds great, but there were still many editors adverse to the idea of playing an old-school flight sim.

AvP2 grabbed our attention by taking class based multip ayer gaming and upping it with mu t.ple species; it's not only a matter of carrying different guns and items, you also have to contend with different play sty.es. And that's not to mention the other interest ng modes built nto *AvP2*. Yes, the netcode at first release was poor, but in the world of online gaming, patches come and go, and with the patched netcode, we found that we just had the most fun when it came to face-hugging/smart-gunning/cloak and slashing each other.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Best Weapon

Return to Castle Wolfenstein's Flamethrower

We hate to say it's the best thing about the game, but unfortunately it is. Squirting stream after stream of realistic-looking volumetric fire out of this baby took us back to our adolescent hobby of lighting our own...er, never mind, there might be some impressionable types reading this.

GAME OF

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GameSpy Best Of 2001 PC Game of the Year

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THE YEAR†

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BEST ROLE-PLAYING GAME

Wizardry 8

SIR-TECH CANADA | NOMINEE ANACHRONOX

It's an old-school, turn-based, unapologetically hardcore labor of love from veteran gamemakers.

Never mind for a moment that Sir-Tech's *Wizardry 8* is our hands-down winner for Role Playing Game of the Year and an absolute classic of the genre. We'll get to that. First, let's just marvel at the fact that this game exists at all. Because for years *Wizardry 8* was the RPG That Time Forgot, a game in development for forever that seemed doomed to never see the light of day.

We put *Wizardry 8* on our cover way back in 1998, the first time we previewed the latest installment of one of gaming's most venerated series. Along with *Ultima* and *Might and Magic*, *Wizardry* formed part of PC gaming's grand trinity of brilliant, hardcore RPGs. Our hopes were high.

Sadly, though, as the '90s wound down, all three series seemed to be petering out. *Ultima* went down in flames with the woeful *Ultima IX*. 3DO seemed intent on milking the *Might and Magic* franchise to creative death with a series of hasty releases, and *Wizardry 8*—well, where the heck was it?

After our cover story, Sir-Tech, despite the series' pedigree, suffered the ignominy of not being able to find a publisher for *Wizardry 8*. No one wanted it. Its time had passed. We had *Diablo* now. *Baldur's Gate*. *EverQuest*. No one

All the pretty horses...shall die.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Best Use of Humor

Anachronox

Before they flamed out this year, Ion Storm finally managed to get *Anachronox* out the door—and it was worth the effort. Tom Hall's epic RPG was bursting with laugh-out-loud, throwaway dialogue and cut-scenes that, as in the best LucasArts adventures, had nothing to do with the story but everything to do with keeping us entertained. A classy exit for gaming's favorite whipping boys.

wanted to play an old-school, turn-based dungeon romp from a crusty old Canadian game company. So, *Wizardry 8* vanished, and we forgot about it, like everyone else.

Everyone except Sir-Tech.

This year, at long last, through sheer determination, Sir-Tech found a way to get *Wizardry 8* out the door. There's still no publisher: They're just distributing it directly through Electronics Boutique. We had to go buy it at EB just like you, and we're not used to that. But the great and frankly astonishing thing we all discovered was that *Wizardry 8*, after all these years, was worth every penny—and then some.

Wizardry 8 is an awesome achievement. It's an old-school, turn-based unapologetically hardcore labor of love from veteran gamemakers who knew exactly what they were doing. No wonder publishers were scared—this game is the epitome of uncool. But these days, as far as we're concerned, that makes it 10 times cooler. We haven't played an RPG this deep and challenging and so unabashedly dorky in years. As with their great *Jagged Alliance* series, Sir-Tech has shown their uncanny ability to make extremely tough games that maintain a great deal of charm and a winning sense of humor. (And you can credit the hilarious voice acting for much of that.)

Wizardry 8 is everything longtime fans could have hoped for, picking up right where the series left off, but it's accessible to newbies as well. Amazingly, you can still import your 5-year-old *Wiz 7* party. The level and dungeon design is top-notch (check out the city built in trees) and the combat system, as always with this series, is complex but not overwhelming. The game is surprisingly great-looking, too, given its old-school roots, with a very clean and modern 3D engine that more than does the job. We would have settled for less.

If indeed Sir-Tech doesn't make any more games, as they've publicly stated, then it's a bittersweet ending indeed. But instead of mourning the loss, let's celebrate Sir-Tech's achievement with *Wizardry 8*, the best RPG of 2001. Against all odds, they've capped off a legendary series with class.

Sir-Tech's achievement is even more surprising given how many other RPGs we were anticipating instead. Last year at this time, we were positively drooling over *NeverWinter Nights*, *Dungeon Siege*, *Morrowind*, and *Arcanum*. Of the four, only *Arcanum* even came out, and it just didn't match our expectations. Ironically, our only other candidate in this category this year was *Anachronox*, another game in development for forever, from another company no longer making games. It's hilarious, too—and well worth your time.

Epic battles like this one against Demogorgon helped usher *TOB* to victory.

BEST GAME EXPANSION

Baldur's Gate II: Throne of Bhaal

PUBLISHER INTERPLAY DEVELOPER BIOWARE

NOMINEES **DIABLO II: LORD OF DESTRUCTION**
THE SIMS: HOT DATE

Most expansions are just hastily slapped-together scenarios thrown onto a disc and sold for a pretty penny. Expansions that truly expand the original game are rare; usually the one expansion we find that does so ends up the winner of this category by default. But this year, we're happy to report that we had no fewer than three nominees that are all stellar examples of expansions. Each one brought their respective game to a new level, and would have easily won this category in years past.

Rather than merely add new critters the *Diablo II* expansion upped the game's resolution and added two new character classes, an entire act, and about a bajillion new items and monsters. It not only extended the current game, it also added new elements while maintaining the elegant balance that Blizzard is known for. *Hot Date* added the one thing *The Sims* players clamored for, which was the ability to actually leave the house.

What ultimately gave *Throne of Bhaal* the nod was that after adding new spells, abilities, a class, and a dungeon, it offered up a classy ending to the entire *Baldur's Gate* saga. *Throne of Bhaal* did what *Ultima IX* should have done: provided a great send-off to an established franchise. It's a superlative, satisfying reward for those who shepherded their little hero all the way from *BG1*. For providing such great content, and capping off a great series with such a great ending, we give the award to Bioware for *Throne of Bhaal*.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Biggest Flub by CGW

Black & White Review

What can we say? Maybe we ate some bad meat. All we know is, it's hard to agree now that *Black & White* deserved the five stars we gave it in our original review. Sure, the AI was impressive, but after that stopped dazzling us, we discovered, belatedly, a bigger problem: It's boring. Unless you really like slapping monkeys...

It might look like a traditional RTS, but *Kohan*'s innovations were a breath of fresh air.

BEST STRATEGY GAME

Kohan: Immortal Sovereigns

STRATEGY FIRST | TIMEGATE STUDIOS | NOMINEES: CIVILIZATION III • FALLOUT TACTICS • MONOPOLY TYCOON • STRONGHOLD

Every year, we hope to see games that are unique; that take games to new, unexplored heights, and that revolutionize and reinvigorate their genre. Timegate Studios obviously listened and created such a game. When *Kohan: Immortal Sovereigns* was released so many months ago, it was clearly a small game, lacking both megabucks marketing and the hype said bucks are spent for. But it was also immediately obvious that *Kohan* took the entire genre in new directions. This game represents both an evolution and a revolution for strategy gaming.

It was immediately obvious that *Kohan* took the entire strategy genre in new directions.

Kohan's resource management scheme emphasized supply and demand over the traditional micromanagement of units. Rather than having all four nimrods run back to your city and dump your ore /wood/doubloons at the right place and the right time, you have to contend with the bigger picture of how much income you have and whether a deficit is going to bite into the surplus of your other goods. Instead of maniacally clicking for your resource gatherers to stop being lazy, you have to consider whether you can afford another company.

Yes, a company. No, that doesn't mean a bunch of units that happen to be near each other; we're talking about an organized combat unit. With fully customizable companies, you can dictate whether those archers stay in the back or boldly walk in front. Because company composition requires different types of resources just to stay active (the upkeep), that whole "rush with just one type of unit" tactic doesn't work anymore. But while rushes don't work, smart company planning does, as the AI will then act on your behalf in the most appropriate manner. That's right. It'll make sure the individual units within

Kohan's innovative use of companies adds order to RTS play.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Best Music

Tropico

It's the rare game that makes you want to get up and groove, but *Tropico* did just that. The game's brilliant Bachata music captured the atmosphere of a poor banana republic and made you feel like Latin rhythm was in your blood. It was easily the year's most evocative soundtrack.

the company don't do anything stupid—so you won't have archers running in and punching things, or cavalry impaling themselves on opponents' pikes. You have only to worry about the grander tactics, like retreating, routing, and making sure the economy keeps flowing. Add to all that the zone-of-control rules that dictate, depending on terrain and company, where attacks can be initiated, and you realize that there is a lot of game underneath the hood. It was almost like a mix of the best of turn-based classics, like *Heroes of Might and Magic* with the real-time trappings of *Myth*.

Strategy tends to be a stuffy, self-replicating genre full of copycats and mimics. Someone gets a good idea every couple of years, and then every yahoo tries to capitalize on that good idea. Recently, though, the genre has boasted innovation and refinement across the board. *Civilization III* was another fantastic candidate. Many feel it's the best game so far in the series and is the new benchmark for turn-based strategy games. The addition of culture and other gameplay advances further perfect the game, but ultimately, *Civilization III* is more evolution than revolution for Sid Meier's tried-and-true award-winning formula.

It's a beautiful day for hunting bad guys.

Monopoly Tycoon and *Stronghold* were both extraordinarily creative and unique, with new settings for gameplay. But due to their limited scope, they never attained the level of true brilliance *Tycoon* gave traditional *Monopoly* a depth that was unimaginable from the board game. *Stronghold* took players to a medieval castle and gave closet barons a chance to try their hand at running a virtual citadel. *Fallout Tactics* charmed many an editor at the office, fusing the best parts of *Fallout* with the tactical savvy of a *Jagged Alliance* or an *X-COM*.

But while each of these games was a worthy contender, the ultimate contest came down to the behemoth that's *Civilization III* and *Kohan*. As much as we love Sid, we have to give the nod to the little guy who managed to infuse the genre with innovation.

BEST WARGAME

Vietnam Squad Battles

PUBLISHER: HPS SIMULATIONS DESIGNER: JOHN TILLER | NOMINEES: SHOGUN: TOTAL WAR, WARLORD EDITION

There hasn't been a PC wargame about tactical combat in Vietnam in almost 20 years, and after so much time, it's nice to see such a worthy game. John Tiller's *Vietnam: Squad Battles* manages to be a compelling wargame that focuses on the things that matter: the soldiers. Far from being a bland, heartless conversion of Nazis to Vietcong, Tiller's game shows that there's still some life in traditional wargaming systems. While the game's engine isn't particularly innovative or special, the scenarios and setting create an atmosphere much different from the dreary accounting exercises now passing themselves off as wargames.

It's not nearly as revolutionary as last year's winner, *Combat Mission*, but *VSB* makes it possible to get excited about your units, to sweat out your mission objectives, and do all the other basic gameplay things that wargames have been delivering in smaller and smaller quantities these days. Much of this comes down to how Tiller uses key design elements like support weapons and squad composition, which shows that a good designer can still teach an old system new tricks.

Unfortunately, the rest of computer wargaming seems stuck in 1970. Instead of new designs, gamers are being offered what amount to new scenario sets based on tired engines (*Bulge '44*, *Divided Ground*) that have not only existed in computer form for some time, but are descended from paper-and-cardboard games that go back decades. While boardgame designers continue to innovate, computer wargames seem frozen in time. Calling Mark Herman, Richard Berg, and Kevin Zucker: Computer wargaming needs you.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Best Enemy

Serious Sam

The best enemy of 2001 wasn't some sneering demonlord or crazy automaton, but a soldier, who, despite having no mouth, managed to scream his way into action gaming. *Serious Sam*'s headless kamikaze soldier, from the moment he appeared on the demo, was by far the most memorable foe of the year.

getting quests is less annoying in *DAoC*.

BEST ONLINE GAME

Dark Age of Camelot

VIVENDI UNIVERSAL | MYTHIC ENTERTAINMENT | NOMINEE: ANARCHY ONLINE

Biggest Patch

World War II Online

Tens of thousands of gamers took home a copy of *World War II Online* and were greeted with a *76MB* patch. Many downloaded it and eventually gave up anyway after enduring terrible performance problems and numerous bugs. Rather than being credited for its ambitiousness, *WWII Online* will be remembered for having the worst online launch yet.

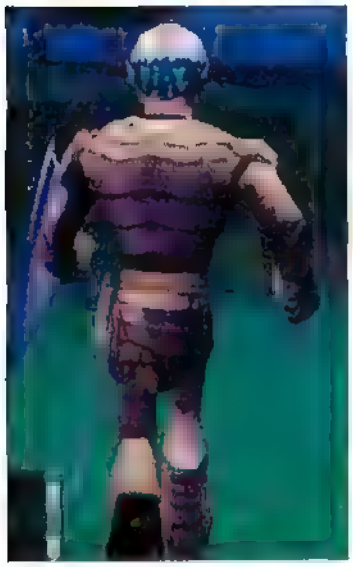
SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

It was supposed to be a revolution dammit. We were supposed to be bombarded with an amazing slew of massively multiplayer online role playing games that would offer different experiences. We were supposed to be jumping into the heart of battle in *World War II Online*, driving hover-cars and zapping things in *Anarchy Online*, and engaging in all sorts of weird Arthurian horseplay in *Dark Age of Camelot*. But many promising games ended up burying themselves in the ground by launching too early and in a broken state. When the dust from these massively multiplayer meteors settled, the two left standing were one kinda-neat sci-fi MMORPG and one really polished one.

DAoC offers an amazing refinement of the base EQ gameplay; they've tweaked everything and made DAoC a smooth experience.

What was it about *DAoC* that captured both the *CGW* staffers who bother getting into these games in the first place and even some non-MMORPG fans in the process? Did it bring *EQ* gameplay to the elusive Next Level? Well, not really. Instead, what *DAoC* offers is an amazing refinement of the base *EQ* gameplay; they've tweaked everything and made *DAoC* a smooth experience. Remember sitting around *EQ*, waiting for your feeble Elven mind to memorize another *SoW* or some other spell acronym? Or getting whacked by some Dark Elf, and then having to either beg a bard or necromancer to help you out or just run out into the wild looking for your corpse, which was probably still surrounded by what killed you in the first place? *DAoC* steps in and fixes those annoyances; you usually have to sit around for only three minutes at most as health, mana, and stamina recover briskly, and when you die, you lose only experience, some of which you can gain

The social atmosphere has been refined.



back by finding your grave and praying at it (your loot is still on you). Looking for a group of like-minded fellows to band together and kill critters with? Instead of spamming the chat window with inane, acronym-filled /Shouts, just hit a menu button that will filter and present everyone who is looking to group up with you. Even though the control scheme is on the arcane side (F6 to initiate combat? Who thought of that one?), the onscreen interface is very clean and customizable.

The gameplay refinements were welcome, but even better was the smooth launch. People could register their accounts, the servers were online, and you could actually jump in, run around, hit things, and whatnot. Contrast that with games requiring a massive patch essentially containing the core engine (cough *World War II Online* cough) or that had quirky combat and mission/quest bugs (*Anarchy Online*). Except for a few minor problems, *DAoC* was as smooth a launch as we could have hoped for.

You could criticize the game for not providing the most compelling high-level content. I mean, you can go on dragon raids in *EQ*, but you're mostly stuck to fighting other high-level dorks in *DAoC*. While the high-level, Realm-versus-Realm content could stand some improvement, there are so many other classes and races to play—with such wide variety among them—that you can get your money's worth just going in and replaying as all the varieties of classes until level 20 or so. Let's see if Mythic can keep up the pace and give us high level dorks something more than each other to kill.

For fixing basically everything that was ever annoying about *EQ*, and then proving that a new MMORPG doesn't have to be a free-falling bomb at launch, we're giving kudos to *DAoC* for being the Online Game of the Year.

BEST SPORTS GAME

High Heat 2002

[illegible] DEVELOPER 3DO | NOMINEES: CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER • COLLEGE YEARS • EA SPORTS GAMES

While *High Heat 2002* wasn't the improvement that *HH2001* was over *HH2000*—and made nowhere near the brilliant leap that *2000* made over *1999*—the *High Heat* franchise did see another significant upgrade in its hallowed line of baseball sims this year. *High Heat Major League Baseball 2002* is still the best simulation of our national pastime on any platform.

High Heat 2002 took the already excellent stats engine and sharp pitcher-batter interface from earlier incarnations and slapped them into a brand-new graphics engine. Players and stadiums look better than ever, thanks to higher polygon counts. But what made gamers feel as though they were watching a real game were the added animations. Base coaches waving runners in and first basemen stretching to dig throws out of the dirt added a lot of authentic flavor to the game and made for an immersing experience.

The truth is that we almost didn't give an award in this category. The entire genre has been in steady decline for years, with fewer games living up to any level of quality that PC gamers expect. And those that do seem to be coming from the fringe. Forget about the EA Sports games, the only real contenders this year to *High Heat*'s throne were a couple of old school text based games. We really respected *Championship Manager*, but the subject matter was over our ignorant American heads, and *The College Years*' innovations were impressive, but the game just came up short. So *High Heat* takes the crown in a woefully slim year.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Best Game We Just Don't Get

Rails Across America

Rails Across America is a very, very good game—according to a pack of our freelancers. We respect our writers' opinions, but not a one of the CGW edit staff could warm up to this 4.5-star robber baron game. But don't let our inability to enjoy stock raids keep you from playing.

An IL-2 strafing Nazi positions in an occupied Russian city.

BEST SIMULATION GAME

IL-2 Sturmovik

PUBLISHER: UBI SOFT | DEVELOPER: 1C:MADDOX

NOMINEES: **BATTLE OF BRITAIN · INDEPENDENCE WAR 2 · MS FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2002 · NASCAR RACING 4**

IL-2 Sturmovik's election to Sim of the Year was one of the biggest shoo-in votes in the history of this magazine. The casual observer might say that's because it was a weak year for simulations in general, especially flight sims. That's selling *Sturmovik* way short and shows a distinct lack of appreciation for some other really good sims that came out this year. Know this: *Sturmovik* is not only the best simulation of 2001, it's the best WWII themed sim ever, and one of the best flight sims of all time.

Why, you ask? The easy answer is because it gets everything right. Then again, most games headed to the Hall of Fame (as this one surely is) do everything right. What sim-jockeys want is for their sims to be *really* right, as in really realistic and really detailed. And *Sturmovik* is accurate to an amazing degree, from its unflinchingly realistic flight model to its historically sound portrayal of a major theatre of WWII that remains obscure to most Americans, even some military history buffs.

Sturmovik is not only the best simulation this year, it's one of the best flight sims of all time.

Flying your Sturmovik fighter-bomber (or your BF-109 or your Yak 9 or one of the many other planes) is an appropriately hairy experience. The planes feel like cobbled-together buckets of bolts—which they often were—thanks to well-modeled turbulence and highly accurate controls. Just getting off the ground will take some life off the seat of your pants. Don't be intimidated by that if you're a newbie, though. While the physics are stringent enough to please the hardcore enthusiasts, the realism scales down quite nicely so that the game is very accessible.

Even newbies will be able to appreciate

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Better Red Than Dead Award

Bohemia Interactive, Croteam, 1C:Maddox

We thought they just stood in bread lines. Turns out that Eastern Europeans are also busy making some of the best PC games in the world. Here's a raised fist of brotherly solidarity to 2001's red stars: Croteam (*Serious Sam*), 1C:Maddox (*IL-2 Sturmovik*), and Bohemia Interactive (*Operation Flashpoint*).

a lot of the subtle nuances in the game. The actual plane models look amazing, with various paint schemes and accurate squadron logos. But they look most impressive when they start to fall apart. Bullets and flak tear holes in wings and fuse ages, exposing the skeletal frames beneath. And you can actually watch bomber crews move to and from their gun positions.

That's to mention none of the activity on the ground. Since the title plane is a fighter-bomber, a good number of the missions involve attacking ground targets. But instead of just attacking some column of trucks or a supply depot, ground runs in *Sturmovik* throw the player into the midst of full-scale ground battles involving clashing galoons of armor. The effect of diving through a hailstorm of antiaircraft fire with a German Bf-109 closing on your tail just so you can get close enough to shoot off a couple of rocket salvos at a column of panzers is amazing.

IL-2 Sturmovik has everything we want in a sim: great graphics, great sound, great effects, great multiplayer support, great everything. It's the definition of a game of the year and got some serious consideration from a few *CGW* editors to win the overall prize. But even if *Sturmovik* hadn't made it out by the end of 2001, there were a few worthy contenders in the genre.

Due to the limited number of flight sims out there, we expanded the category's scope this year to include all types of simulations. *Microsoft's Flight Simulator 2002* was an excellent iteration of the esteemed series, and took on the daunting task of increasing the detail level of the entire world at least a hundredfold. And *Battle of Britain* had some nice dog-fighting sequences, even if the setting has been done to death in combat flight simulators. *Independence War 2* continued to test our knowledge of physics, while *NASCAR Racing 4* continued to make us believe in the complex strategy involved in driving around in circles at 200 mph. Whoever said sims are dead didn't know what they were talking about.

A Bf-109 in the sights goes down.

BEST PUZZLE/CLASSIC GAME

Bejeweled

In retrospect, the transaction had the innocence of an addict's first drug buy. "Here," the seemingly harmless man said genially, "Take this floppy—one of our little games." Amid the ear splitting din of E3, the man's little game had little chance of being taken seriously. C'mon, the game was on a single floppy, for crying out loud, a *floppy*. One of those colored floppies to boot, the bright pink novelty kind that no one can possibly take seriously. But three weeks later, that garish floppy beckoned from one *CGW* editor's desk. "What the hell," he mused, "I'll take a quick look and then uninstall it."

That's how the *Bejeweled* sickness began. The simple little puzzle game consumed the editor, and his colleagues ridiculed him right up until they tried it—and hour upon hour of productive work time slipped away. Were the Game of the Year award based solely upon time spent playing, then *Bejeweled* would have won handily, as it insinuated itself throughout all of gamedom. It became the most downloaded game from MSN.com and the improbable subject of lengthy discussions on strategy. The music, the rewarding crescendo of a lengthy chain clearing the game board, the deeply satisfying validation of an "Excellent!" proclamation after a great move. All of this combined to create a game as simple yet addictive as *Tetris*.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Best Use of a License That Was Ignored

Monopoly Tycoon

Infogrames boldly went where no publisher had gone before, transforming the *Monopoly* board-game into a tremendously fun, challenging game that had nothing to do with the source material, save for place names and spirit. Blessed with great AI and gameplay, *Monopoly Tycoon* was probably the most pleasant surprise of the year.

POOL OF RADIANCE

Coaster of the Year

NOMINEES: **MAJESTIC • SURVIVOR: THE INTERACTIVE GAME • WORLD WAR II ONLINE**

With a baker's dozen of fecal donuts to choose from, this year's Coaster of the Year competition was the fiercest yet. Plenty of big publishers were wiping their collective behinds with CDs and tossing the filth-into nifty boxes with $30 price tags—but which was the crappiest? EA's brain-liquefyingly dull *Majestic* was the highest profile turd, but Infogrames' *Survivor: The Interactive Game* was undoubtedly the most excruciatingly inept and unplayable game since the fabled *Trespasser*. And what about the spectacular flameout of *World War II Online*—winner of worst online launch in any universe and a game so resolutely incompetent it has led to Chapter 11 filing by its creators? Playing any of these games was like skydiving while locked in a portable toilet—you couldn't dodge the crap. With all the number two being excreted, which game was number one? It was a tough call, but Ubi Soft's *Pool of Radiance: Ruins of Myth Drannor* seized number one—and sprayed that number one all over everyone and everything.

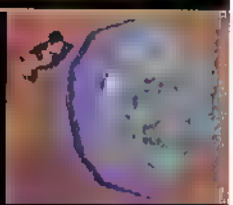
With all the number two being excreted, which game was number one?

With a heady flourish of scores of zippers unzipping, the *Pool of Radiance* team blithely whizzed all over their game, the *D&D* license, and the fundamental concepts of playability and fun in gaming. But it was purchasers of *Pool* that really got a face full of Ubi Soft's torrent of contempt as they trashed one of the most beloved franchises in gaming history—the landmark "Gold Box" series of *D&D* games—and threw in a hard drive-wiping bug just for fun. Forget the unusable interface, the hideously repetitive play, the lack of real role-playing in a role-playing game, and nearly every other profound failure swirling the drain of this horror. It was the betrayal of gamers' trust and the Gold Box *Pool* legacy that cemented *Pool of Radiance*'s place as the worst game released in 2001.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Worst Use of a License Followed to a T

Survivor



If ever there was an argument for giving negative star ratings to games, *Survivor: The Interactive Game* was it. We suggest playing with your own poo over playing *Survivor*, a game that slavishly follows the structure of the hit TV show while capturing absolutely none of what makes it such a hit. Why couldn't publisher Infogrames have learned something from their own success with *Monopoly Tycoon*?

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EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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BEST TECHNOLOGY

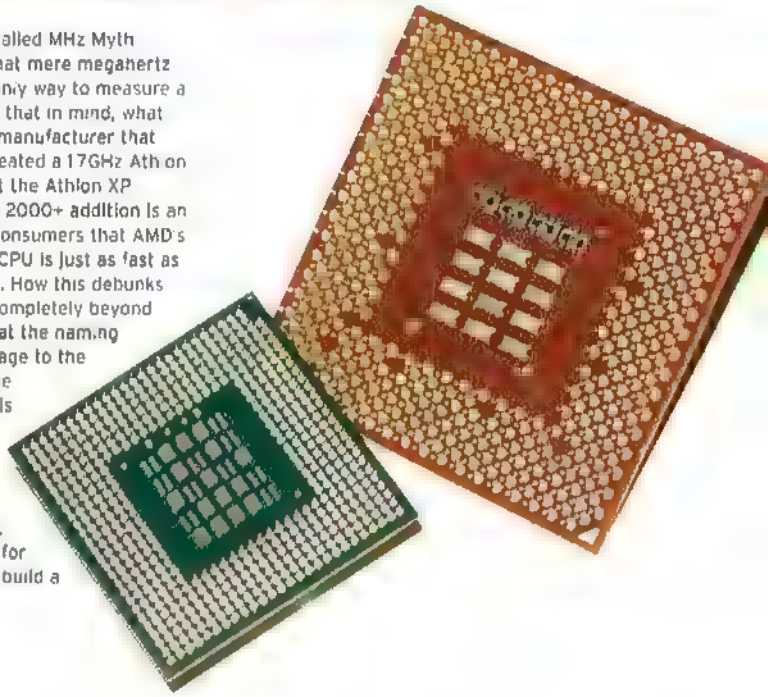
Really Fast CPUs

NOMINEES: GEFORCE3 TI 500 GRAPHICS CARD · CREATIVELABS SOUNDBLASTER AUDIGY SOUND CARD

This year's Technology of the Year award goes to two companies: Intel and AMD.

By mid-2001 Intel had reached the 2GHz barrier, and by year's end 2.2GHz Pentium 4 CPUs were available. While many (well, many people at AMD at least) downplayed the importance of this milestone, the fact remains that 2GHz-plus Pentium 4 machines are super fast. In fact, they're the fastest CPUs we've ever tested. The only real knock against the Pentium 4 was that, until the end of 2001, buying one meant you had to use the more expensive and slower RAMBUS type of memory. But that problem, too, was solved when DDR based motherboards that supported Pentium 4 CPUs started shipping recently.

Still waging their verbal jihad against the juggernaut that is Intel, AMD spent the year nipping at Intel's heels. AMD's main struggle has been trying to downplay the so-called MHz Myth. AMD's theory is that mere megahertz shouldn't be the only way to measure a CPU's power. With that in mind, what did the little chip manufacturer that could do? They created a 1.7GHz Athlon chip and dubbed it the Athlon XP 2000+. Huh?! The 2000+ addition is an attempt to show consumers that AMD's 1.7GHz Athlon XP CPU is just as fast as a 2GHz Pentium 4. How this debunks the MHz Myth is completely beyond us, considering that the naming scheme pays homage to the MHz Myth. Still, the Athlon XP 2000+ is plenty fast, and seeing that it costs about $200 less than the 2.2GHz Pentium 4, it's a great option for anyone looking to build a cheaper rig.



DOORSTOP OF THE YEAR

RAMBUS

Related to the battle highlighted above was the memory war being waged between the makers of DDR memory (Crucial, among others) and RAMBUS (Kingston, among others). No one ever doubted that DDR was faster than RAMBUS, but the fact that it's also cheaper really hurt RAMBUS (certain brand-name DDR modules are about the same price as RAMBUS modules), the only memory type other than SDRAM suitable for Pentium users. While Athlon devotees sang the praises of DDR, Intel trumpeted the advantages of RAMBUS. But the fact remains that while 256MB of PC2100 DDR memory costs about $50, 256MB of RAMBUS memory costs about $70. That's significant, especially considering that DDR outperforms RAMBUS and that AMD CPUs are less expensive than Pentium 4s.

Further damaging RAMBUS' position is the fact that DDR memory is more versatile. All you need is a single DDRM module, but you have to add RAMBUS modules in pairs. Now that DDR based motherboards are shipping for the Pentium 4, it's safe to say that this war is pretty much over and it's time to sign the armistice. Now, if we can only find a pen

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

Best Innovation Destined for Overuse

Max Payne's Bullet-Time

Max Payne's "bullet-time" feature is so well done and so key to the gameplay that it's hard to imagine the game without it. What we suspected might be nothing more than a gimmick turned out to be the game's coolest feature, adding a nice twist to the standard run-and-gun shooter. So watch now while everyone and their grandma imitates the feature next year.

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«Mega Games»

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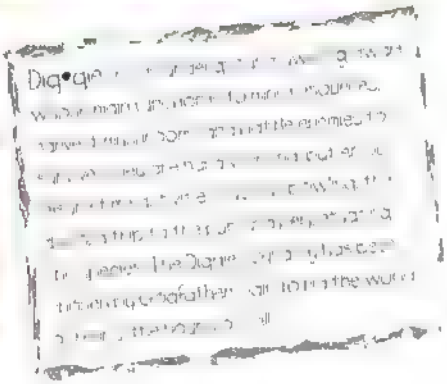

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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Comic Mischief
Mild Violence

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Reviews

We love games, we hate games Edited by Robert Coffey

Operation Flashpoint: Red Hammer

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How Do We Rate?

We review only finished games—no betas, no patches

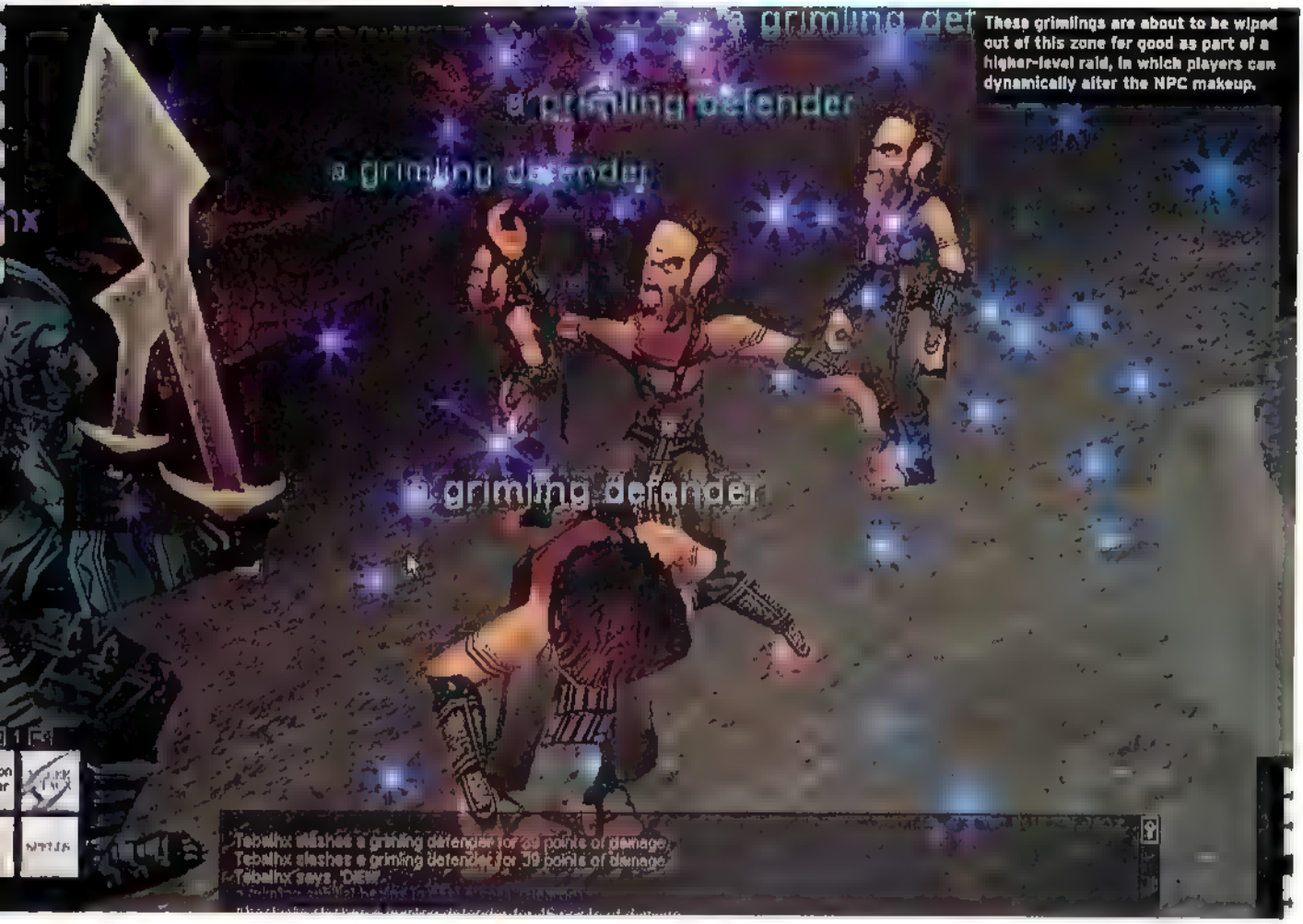
OUTSTANDING The rare game that gets it all right. A must-play experience.

VERY GOOD Worthy of your time and money, but there are drawbacks.

AVERAGE Either an ambitious design with major flaws, or just vanilla.

WEAK Seriously lacking in play value, poorly conceived, or just another clone.

ABYSMAL The rare game that gets it all wrong. Pathetic. Goaster material.



These grimlings are about to be wiped out of this zone for good as part of a higher-level raid, in which players can dynamically alter the NPC makeup.

EverQuest: The Shadows of Luclin

Kill stuff, buy stuff, repeat until dead **By Jeff Green**

PUBLISHER Sony Online Entertainment DEVELOPER Verant Interactive CONTACT www.everquest.com ESRB RATING Mature; animated blood and gore, animated violence, suggestive themes PRICE $29.99

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400MHz or higher, 256MB RAM, 16MB 3D card, 450MB hard drive space, 28.8 modem RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS Pentium III or higher, 512MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 1.5GB hard drive space, high-speed Internet connection MULTIPLAYER Massively multiplayer

Some people wish *EverQuest* would go away forever—just ask my wife. Since its debut in 1999, Sony's massively multiplayer role-playing game has sucked hordes of people, for $10 a month, into its life draining vortex. We've all heard stories of people who have lost their jobs and/or relationships to *EverQuest*, which is both funny and pathetic but also underscores, in an extreme way, just how compelling this kind of game can be.

The Shadows of Luclin is Sony Online's third expansion to *EverQuest*, and, like *The Ruins of Kunark* and *The Scars of Velious* before it, its primary goal is to keep dedicated players happily hooked, lest they stray off and find some new addiction. To that extent, it's a great success, and if you're a hardcore *EQ* player, it's worth it. For newbies, though, it's a tougher call.

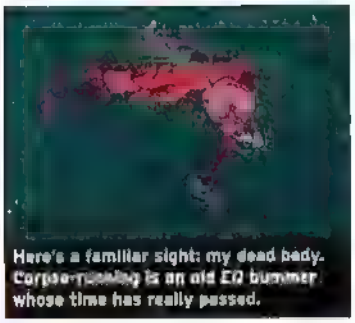
First, however, the bad news: *Luclin*'s system requirements are obscenely high. Verant has upgraded *EQ*'s graphics with all-new character models and higher-resolution textures everywhere, and they do look great. The problem is that if you want to see those new graphics, you'd better have a state-of-the-art PC or else plan on buying some new hardware. Forget the minimum specs on the box—they're bogus. You need to meet our recommended requirements to see all the new graphics. That means 512MB of RAM at least, a fast Pentium III, and a high-end video card. Anything less RAM-wise, and you can't even enable all the new character models—you'll have to choose a smaller subset. That's minus a half-star right there.

If you have the right PC, though, then the rest of the news is good. This is a giant, generous slab of new gaming from Verant. There's a new planet to explore with dozens of zones for players of all levels, a new character class, a new race, alternate advancement routes for high-level players, and more. It's easily enough to keep you going for hundreds of hours.

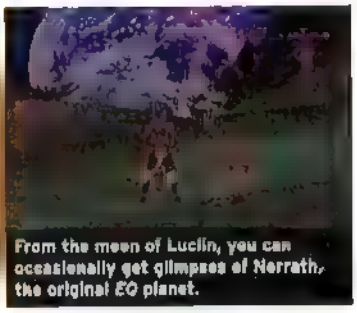
Cat Men from Spaaaaaaace!

Luclin is a moon of Norrath—home to all *EQ* players until now—and it plays host to the new race, the cat-like Vah Shir. How a race of giant cats ended up on the moon is explained in the backstory, but whatever. The important thing is that it's all new turf for players to kill and buy stuff. The Vah Shir are giant creatures, somewhat similar to Barbarians, but with the feline abilities to sneak, see in the dark, and fall long distances without taking much damage. Take that latter ability lightly, though. I jumped off a roof to test it out and ended up staring at my corpse. Space cats can be warriors, shamans, bards, or rogues, though of

A Vah Shir guard models some armor and demonstrates the imposing strength of these Barbarian-like creatures. Me-owl



Here's a familiar sight: my dead body. Corpse-running is an old *EQ* bummer whose time has really passed.



From the moon of Luclin, you can occasionally get glimpses of Norrath, the original *EQ* planet.

Horses enable you to travel extremely fast, but you're going to have to be extremely rich to afford one—they're a minimum of 8,000 platinum.

My real problems with *Luclin* are actually just with *EQ* itself.

course most players will want to try the new class, the beastlord, which was tailor-made for the race (back on Norrath, Ogres, Trolls, Barbarians, and the Iksar can be beastlords, too).

The beastlord is a great addition, combining abilities of the warrior and shaman classes while adding new ones—you can do a little bit of almost everything. Your strength makes you a good melee fighter, with an emphasis on claw-augmented hand-to-hand combat, while your shamanistic nature gives you some spell-casting abilities, such as healing and being able to command a pet to fight alongside you.

This combination makes for excellent solo play—perfect for ant-social curmudgeons like me. I made it to level 13 easily almost entirely solo, and on the server I was on most other people were playing solo too. While this may seem to miss the point of a massively multiplayer game, the feeling of community remains, with the game's mostly good-natured players constantly trading and helping one another. This community feel is still one of *EQ*'s best qualities.

A Not-So-Holy Quest

Luclin's quest structure is *EQ*'s best yet. Newbies get multipart quests right away, while higher-level players can engage in giant, dynamic campaigns that in some cases can actually alter a zone's makeup. Verant gave me a "twinked" character so I could check this out, and it was extremely cool. By aligning with one enemy NPC race, we helped wipe out two other races from the zone completely. My twinked character also went for a ride on *EQ*'s new horses. The good: They're incredibly fast and they're yours to keep. The bad: The view is awkward (in first person, the horse's head is in the way), and they're expensive as hell—a minimum of 8,000 platinum.

My problems with *Luclin* are actually just with *EQ* itself. At this point, the weaknesses in *EQ*'s interface design and gameplay are getting harder to tolerate, especially with great alternatives like *Dark Age of Camelot*. *DAoC* succeeds largely because it lacks *EverQuest*'s biggest frustrations: interminable downtime, tiresome corpse runs, and a clunky, newbie-hostile interface.

Luclin is cool, and faithful *EQ*'ers should get it if they have a capable PC, but it's time for Verant to take on the bigger issues now. If they can put cat people on the moon, then it's high time they figure out how to give newbies a freakin' compass.

For strategy tips on The Shadows of Luclin, *go to page 122*

VERDICT ★★★★☆

If you love *EQ* and have a high-end system, *Luclin* is a must-have. Everyone else, proceed with caution.

The *Gothic* engine can create a far fogging distance, making the world seem big.

Gothic

Ultima IX meets HBO's *Oz* By Thierry Nguyen

PUBLISHER: Xicat Interactive
DEVELOPER: Piranha Bytes
URL: www.xicat.com/games/Gothic.htm
ESRB RATING: Teen; blood, violence, suggestive themes

REQUIREMENTS: Pentium II 400, 128MB RAM, 700MB hard drive space RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS: Pentium III 600, 192MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: None
PRICE: $39.95

If you like stylish flopperry in your RPG, then check out *Gothic*. Taking place entirely within a shielded prison colony, this action-RPG throws you as a new convict into a highly factionalized prison society, and details the breaking of the shield that separates the prison from the rest of the world.

What would be backstory filler in another game, the prison camps are *Gothic*'s greatest strength. In simulating this society, *Gothic* brings back the world last seen in the likes of *Ultima* and *Daggerfall*: Day becomes night, people do their chores and go home to sleep. If you're caught walking into someone's hut, you'll be accosted and probably even attacked. Gone is the old RPG trick of walking into someone's place and robbing him blind under his nose; you gotta make sure he's far away before robbing. Early in the game, you choose to join either the Old Camp, made up of miners and authoritarian guards; the New Camp, populated by bandits and mercenaries; or the Sect Camp of drugged-out cultists.

Because the NPCs have strong camp allegiances, traditional FedEx quests are more significant in *Gothic*. Quests often require you to go among the three camps and sometimes engage in sabotage. You can do things like bribe a guard to look away and then merrily beat down a miner who's been giving you lip; make money by being a drug dealer or a hunter; or defy and then kill a slave owner.

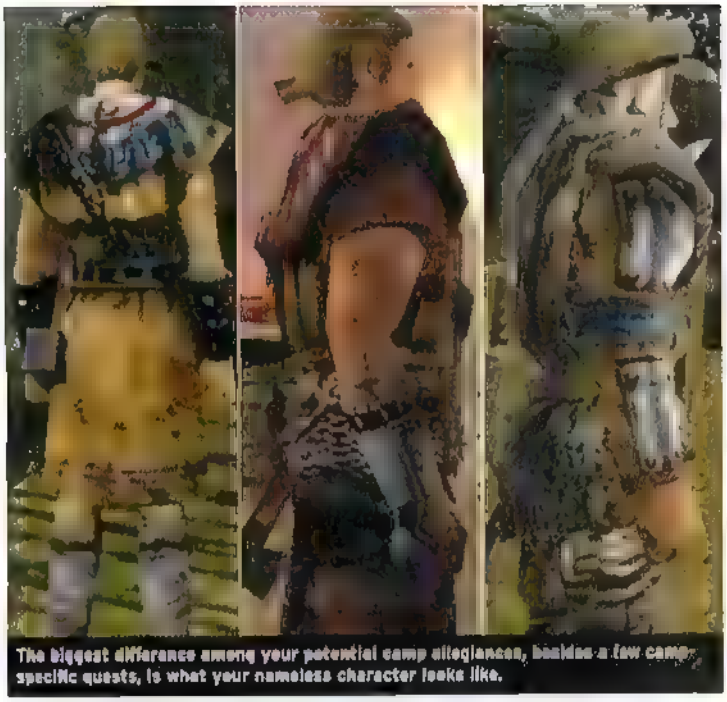
Big Prison, Little Convicts

There's no character generation here; you start the game as a newbie convict with the barest of stats and no skill. Instead of classes, you have a small tree of skills and stats to improve, such as strength, magic, two-handed weapons, and acrobatics. Leveling up gives you skill points to spend on these skills via various trainers. The closest approximation to any sort of class is the camp you join and your rank within it. At one point, you can also join either the Water or Fire mages, but otherwise, you're generally just a fighter.

There are the usual abandoned temples and dungeons, and the focus on just three camps means that each feels like a real town. The world itself is big enough that it takes about 10 minutes to get from one major location to another, but it's hard to get truly lost in this game, as there are easy landmarks to navigate by. I myself wasn't annoyed at the lack of an automap, and you can purchase maps from a cartographer later on.

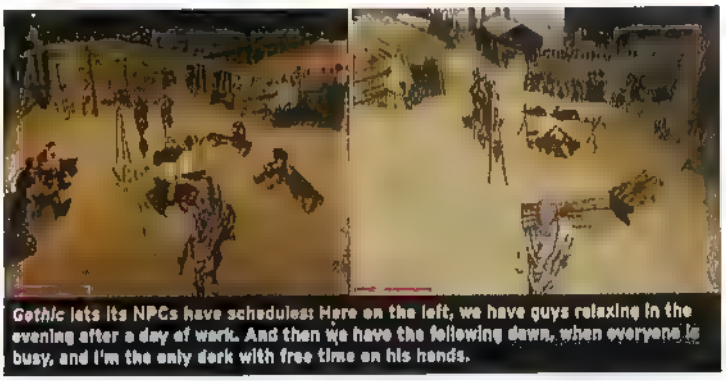
You Must Learn Control!

Yet for all the neat ideas underneath, there's enough to significantly detract from *Gothic*. The control scheme is horrid; in an attempt to streamline, Piranha reduced all control to using the

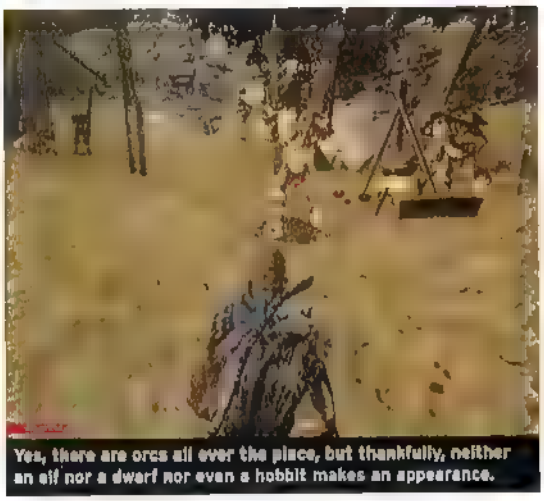


The biggest difference among your potential camp allegiances, besides a few camp-specific quests, is what your nameless character looks like.

Combat is merely annoying most of the time, but fighting multiple enemies like these goblins is extra difficult because you can hit only one thing at a time.



Gothic lets its NPCs have schedules! Here on the left, we have guys relaxing in the evening after a day of work. And then we have the following dawn, when everyone is busy, and I'm the only dork with free time on his hands.



Yes, there are orcs all over the place, but thankfully, neither an elf nor a dwarf nor even a hobbit makes an appearance.

In simulating this factionalized society, *Gothic* brings back the living world last seen in the likes of *Ultima* and *Daggerfall*

herky-jerky keyboard and pressing Ctrl-Up to pick up or use things (yet Ctrl itself doesn't do anything). It seems tailor-made for a gamepad but not a traditional input device. Combat is quite annoying. In the beginning, your pathetic skills combined with the quirky keyboard controls make battles deadly (for you). Even as your skills increase with training, it's hard to pull off more damaging attack combos due to keyboard timing. Fighting more than one critter at a time is difficult, because you can lock on only one target at a time.

The trading interface is the worst: Imagine *Fallout*'s bartering system but with an annoying keyboard-only interface. Instead of, say, selecting 150 ore sword, and then having 150 ore automatically be offered (or in *Fallout*'s case, typing in "150"), you have to hold down a key, and watch the ore count rise from 1 to 150. The process of buying and selling things made me avoid bartering, so I tried to give off the land as much as could.

Also, the first chapter is the best one, because it offers the most freedom. After you've chosen a camp, the game becomes significantly more linear (it's still pretty good, but not outstanding). The main quests are the same; what changes is whom you report to. It also seemed weird that with all the animosity the camps have toward each other, I was able to freely roam among them for the most part. I expected to at least have a hard time when in an opposing camp, rather than be treated as a prospective newbie. Occasional crash bugs and quest goof ups round out the annoyances.

If you can get past the absurd control hurdle and the fact that the beginning is the best part of the game (not to say the rest is bad—remember *Baldur's Gate II* was still fun in its linear chapters), *Gothic* is a satisfying RPG to fiddle with. With *Gothic 2* in the works, let's hope Piranha takes the best part of *Gothic* and crafts a superior game next time.

VERDICT ★★★½☆

Hampered by a horrid control scheme, *Gothic* still is a unique and interesting action-RPG, if only for its nonlinear, faction-oriented beginning.

Gorasul: The Legacy of the Dragon

Lost in the translation By Rob Smolka

PUBLISHER JoWood Productions DEVELOPER Silver Style CONTACT www.gorasul.com ESRB RATING Teen; violence PRICE $29.95

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM, 600MB hard drive space RECOMMENDED Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER None

Take a borrowed, 2-year-old game engine, tack on a clichéd story involving amnesia and a hero rising from the dead to save the world, infest the gameplay with bugs, and translate the text from its original German into a comical form of English, and you've got *Gorasul: The Legacy of the Dragon*.

Things manage to start out in a fairly interesting fashion in this role-playing game from German developer Silver Style. One nice twist is that you can set the game to favor combat, puzzle solving, or a mixture of both. You assume the role of the born-again (literally) Roszandas, and can choose from among the standard fighter/cleric/magic user types of classes. You'll also get to choose a special weapon, complete with stats, the ability to gain levels, and its own personality. A clash of wills between you and your weapon could have made for some great gameplay moments, but most of the time, your weapon is relegated to comic relief or giving you background info.

Gorasul's graphics are a couple of years behind the times, and the animations are comical by today's standards.

As you gain levels, you'll be able to add points to both your normal abilities and your special dragon powers.

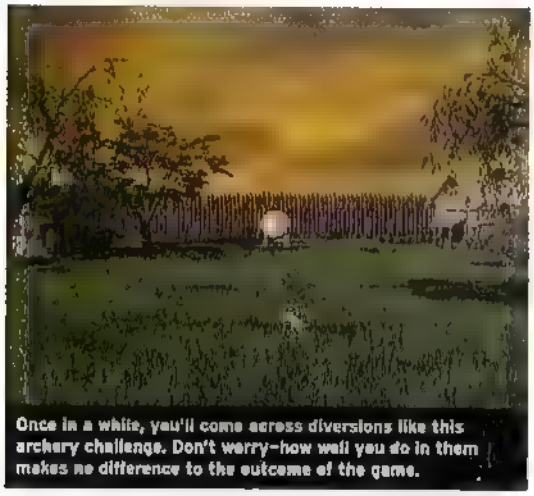
Roszandas also has a set of special powers, which make him much more than the average Joe. When he was a baby, he was left at the doorstep of a dragon's home. The dragon raised Roszandas as his own and imbued him with special dragon abilities, such as breathing fire, accessing additional strength, or causing fear. These powers appear only when Ros is in grave danger, but you have no control over them. One ability you do have some minor control over is Dragon Eyes. As you increase strength in this, the fog of war on the minimap is diminished. All in all, though, these powers seem tacked on, and so much more could have been done with them within the game.

You can set the game to favor combat, puzzle solving, or a mixture of both.

Most of the rest of the game suffers from similarly wasted opportunities. The engine looks like a near-direct copy of the original *Baldur's Gate* engine, which means the look of the game is already well out of date. This wouldn't be so bad if the engine weren't so damned unstable. Trying to save my game became its own game of chance—heads I save properly, and tails I crash back to the desktop, losing whatever progress I made.

The storyline has you recovering from amnesia and then setting off to save the world from evil. (Did they stay up all night coming up with that one?) And though I'm pretty sure this wasn't the designers' intent, most of the fun I had with the game was seeing how absurd the next translation from German to English would be. In fact, I'm not sure the person in charge of this job was fluent in either language.

Some of the quests you'll receive are actually quite cool (especially the mini strategy game that has you defending a kobold city), but mostly the chores are mundane and the gameplay very linear. If the game worked smoothly, it might prove a fun diversion for genre fans, but too much pain has to be endured before the pleasure reveals itself.



Once in a while, you'll come across diversions like this archery challenge. Don't worry—how well you do in them makes no difference to the outcome of the game.

VERDICT ★★☆☆☆

Dated graphics, buggy code, and an unintentionally hysterical translation from the original German are too much to overcome.

Battling the new Olthoi Eviscerator within the bowels of a nest. *Dark Majesty*'s new story will focus on this heretofore ignored race of creatures.

Asheron's Call: Dark Majesty

Affordable housing, Microsoft-style

By Mike Abramson

PUBLISHER Microsoft DEVELOPER Turbine Entertainment
CONTACT www.microsoft.com/games/acdm
ESRB RATING Teen, animated blood, animated violence PRICE $19.99

RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 333, 64MB RAM, 400MB hard drive space, 28.8 modem
RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS Pentium III, 128MB RAM, high-speed Internet connection
MULTIPLAYER Massively multiplayer

Reflecting the third chapter in an ongoing and actively updated story arc, Turbine Entertainment's *Asheron's Call: Dark Majesty* proves itself to be a worthy expansion of the original game. Boasting a low price ($20), the addition of another island to adventure on, the availability of player owned housing, and the promise of upcoming monthly updates, *Dark Majesty* is recommended for everyone who liked the original *Asheron's Call*—and then some. If you've been thinking about playing AC, you'll be happy to know *Dark Majesty* also provides the original AC software and a free month of trial subscription.

The new is and offered by the expansion, Marae Lassel, doesn't reflect a big departure in game software, but it does show the results of a great deal of additional design development and attention to detail, taking full advantage of existing game characteristics (like a capacity for colossal, zone-free outdoor expanses) through better artwork and new models. More important than the visual characteristics is the wealth of bigger quests, monsters, equipment, and story elements that make Marae Lassel unique and fun to explore.

Houses are slowly being released to players, and those who have received them are happy home owners. Previously there was no place for secure off-character item storage, but the housing now available in *Dark Majesty* addresses this by giving homeowners a safe chest in which to keep all of their valuables. Players can also decorate their dwellings with furniture and trophies. Finally, those groups of players able to afford the larger villa- and mansion-class homes can hold social (or combative) events within the sizable dungeons in the buildings.

So is *Dark Majesty* essential for *Asheron's Call* players? Kinda, sorta. The biggest appeal of the game to fans has been the gameworld's evolving story doled out in Turbine's regular updates. And even though *Dark Majesty* represents the next big shift in the world's story, the new content will affect the entire world, not just Marae Lassel, so players who pass on the expansion won't miss out on the new story material. But they won't be able to enjoy the benefits of housing (though they'll still see the houses) or some of the art updates. Also, that free month is applied even to existing accounts, so subtracting that from the cost, the whole package comes to $10 for current players. That's more than a fair price for an expansion this size.

VERDICT ★★★★½

Dark Majesty gives you so much for only $10 that it's hard not to recommend it.

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Serious Sam: The Second Encounter

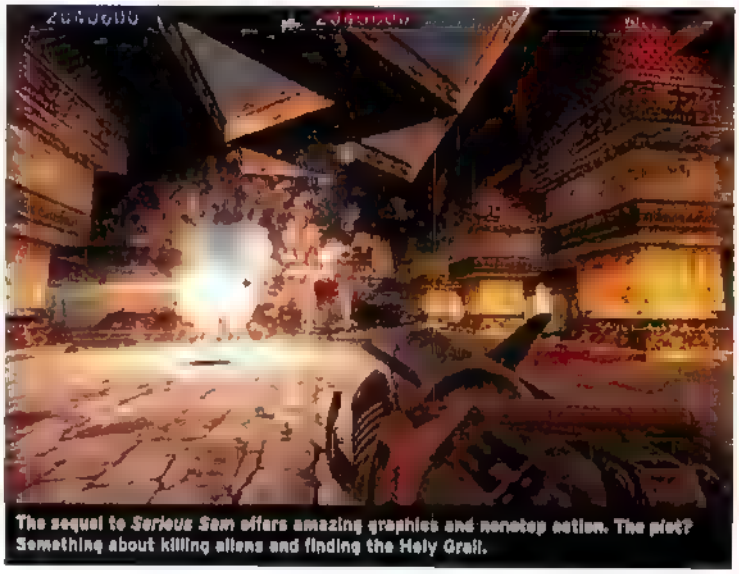
More of the exact same death and destruction By Elliott Chin

PUBLISHER Gathering of Developers
DEVELOPER Croteam CONTACT serioussam.godgames.com ESRB RATING Mature; violence, blood, gore PRICE $19.95

REQUIREMENTS AMD K6-3 400 or Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM, 150MB hard drive space
RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS Athlon 650 or Pentium III 650, 192MB RAM, 450MB hard drive space
MULTIPLAYER Split screen, LAN, Internet (2-16 players)

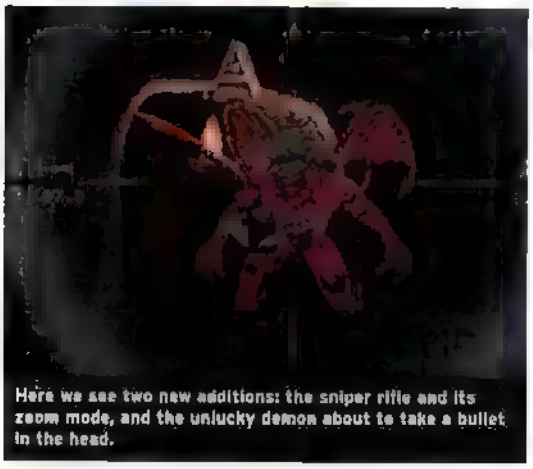
Last year, unknown developer Croteam burst onto the scene with *Serious Sam*, a game that hearkened back to the good old days of *Doom*. Lauded for its simplistic yet fun gameplay, *Serious Sam* was a hit. Now, Croteam is back with a sequel cunningly dubbed *The Second Encounter*, that offers up more of the exact same thing.

Like *Serious Sam* before it, this second game offers nonstop action at a break-neck pace. In every level, you move from arena to arena, where gajillions of enemies are unleashed on you in successively larger waves. Your reward for clearing one stage is the privilege of moving onto the next, where still more enemies await. Like the original, it doesn't take itself too seriously, offering absurd jokes and juvenile humor. Yet, despite what some might deem brain-dead gameplay and an utter lack of sophistication, *TSE* is fun. This game is amazingly accommodating—enemies always come to you—and is the perfect remedy for impatient gamers needing instant gratification. The game's difficulty levels challenge you to replay: It's already insanely hard on the normal setting, and the two higher difficulty levels taunt hardcore action gamers to conquer them.



The sequel to *Serious Sam* offers amazing graphics and nonstop action. The plot? Something about killing aliens and finding the Holy Grail.

This is only a trickle compared to the flood of bad guys that come at you in most levels.



Here we see two new additions: the sniper rifle and its zoom mode, and the unlucky demon about to take a bullet in the head.

TSE offers just enough content to warrant being called a sequel.

TSE offers just enough new content to warrant being called a sequel. In that respect, it is like *Doom II* was to *Doom*. Disappointingly, there aren't too many new weapons or monsters. Additions to your arsenal are the chainsaw, flamethrower, and sniper rifle. The sniper rifle is useful for taking out the vanguard of onrushing enemies, but invariably you'll get overrun (because there are just so many of them), at which point you'll be happy to have both the chainsaw and the flamethrower, which can kill close-range victims easily. Many of the enemies are holdovers from the original game, although there are a few new ones like several gun-toting aliens, a demon, and a pumpkin-headed chainsaw-wielder named Cucurbito. New power-ups include super speed, super damage, and invulnerability.

The game is now spread over three regions (Mayan, Babylon, and medieval Europe), providing an excellent mix of environments that takes you through grasslands, dungeons, courtyards, mountain villages, and lava-filled caverns. The multiplayer options are the same as in the original, but also included are eight new deathmatch levels, a new game mode called Seriously Warped Deathmatch, and an updated networking code.

Graphically, the game looks amazing, with enormous outdoor levels and exquisitely detailed indoor levels. The textures on the walls of the Mayan and Babylonian temples are a joy to look at. Even with a hundred enemies onscreen in a huge outdoor level, there's no slowdown. The music is either melodramatic or lighthearted, and quickens in pace anytime you are in battle.

Aside from the obvious drawbacks of being without innovation and sophistication, *TSE* is also quite short. It can also get tedious, especially as it follows up the original game with like-minded violence, barely offering any new twists in gameplay. Still, *TSE* can be a nice diversion. If you don't take it too seriously, you can enjoy it for what it is: a guilty pleasure that reminds us why *Doom* was so much fun.

VERDICT ★★★½☆

If The First Encounter was Doom, then this is Doom II.

One of the keys to success is convincing golfers that the shots they're taking are more difficult than they really are.

Making your course attractive is important, but it's equally essential that your hole designs offer a challenge to all levels of players.

Sid Meier's SimGolf

It's in the hole! By Rob Smolka

PUBLISHER Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER Firaxis
CONTACT simgolf.ea.com
RATING Everyone; comic mischief, gambling
PRICE $39.95

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM, 300MB hard drive space
RECOMMENDED Pentium II 500, 128MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER None

Some people are blessed with certain abilities. Sid Meier's happens to be the gift of game making. He has the knack of taking any subject, reducing it to its base elements, and putting those elements in the hands of gamers in a way that intrigues their imagination and sense of wonder. With *Sid Meier's SimGolf*, I can tell you that the man has done it again.

Even if you think golf is the most boring activity on earth, I challenge you to spend 10 minutes with this game and not get hooked. You don't have to know anything about the sport or what makes a great course. That's the beauty of the design: The game entertains while showing you the ropes, giving you the ability to succeed as more and more challenges are thrown at you. If other game designers took a few minutes to act on this concept, we'd have a lot more great games on our hands.

In the tried-and-true tradition of the builder/strategy game, you're given a blank slate—in this case a tract of land—and tasked with creating a self sustaining golf course. Your judges and jurors are the golfers that come to your resort. They will either be impressed with your work, which will give you additional funding to make improvements, or they'll be frustrated and bored and have any number of negative feelings about your course. If this is the case, you better start making some changes or it's game over.

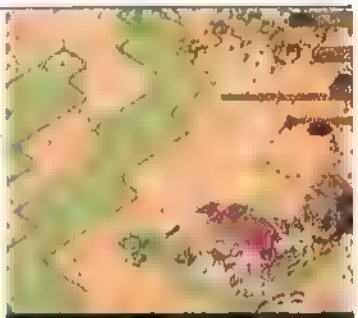
Like any good task/reward game, the better you do, the more you'll gain access to better and better items to draw more and more players. The more appealing your course, the better the opportunities that come your way, such as major tournaments being held at your club. There's always something to tinker with to improve your course, but it never feels like micromanagement.

With so much happening and so many factors at work, you may get lost at times trying to figure out where to devote time and resources. That's where the handy lists and charts come into play—the wealth of information makes it easy to find the trouble spots at a glance.

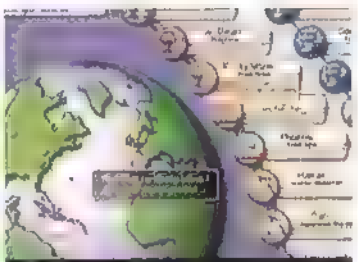
The one gripe that some may have about the game is that the look of the course tends to get cluttered after a while, especially when there are a lot of golfers playing. There are toggles to turn certain items on or off, but it's possible to miss important information this way. Otherwise, the cartoonish look of the game, from the terrain to the golfers, is as charming as it gets.

There's no doubt in my mind that both golf and strategy fans will eat this game up. The presentation is second to none, the gameplay is addictive without being overbearing, and Sid Meier's signature "I-can't-wait-to-see-what-happens-next" magic is here in full force. I hope the golf theme won't turn anyone off, as they'll be missing an amazing gaming experience.

The game entertains while showing you the ropes.



The terrain you get to build on will depend on your location—here's your chance to turn the desert into paradise!



The Sandbox mode gives you access to all of the locations, as well as an unlimited budget to design the course of your dreams.

VERDICT ★★★★★

Sid Meier once again proves he's The Man with a game that all gamers, not just golfers and tycoon fans, will love.

Xtreme Air Racing

The world's fastest motor sport

By Jeff Lackey

PUBLISHER Victory Simulations, Inc.
DEVELOPER Victory Simulations, Inc.
WEB www.xtremeairracing.com
ESRB RATING Everyone
PRICE $29.95

REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 450, 128MB RAM, 650MB hard drive space, joystick
RECOMMENDED None
MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT LAN, Internet (2 to 8 players)

Most of the racing here is only a few feet from the ground.

A slight bump doesn't send you into pit row; it puts you six feet under.

NASCAR racers bumping each other in a turn at 200 mph? Sissy stuff. Formula 1 drivers negotiating a hairpin curve at 100 mph on a rainy track, inches from each other's bumpers? They're nothing more than a bunch of wimps.

You know what real racers do when they want to push the envelope? They race at a few hundred miles per hour around small pylons in a supercharged, nitrous-burning, 3,000-hp P-51 Mustang that's about 50 feet above the ground and careening just inches away from seven other racers insane enough to compete in this sport. Here, a slight bump doesn't send you into pit row—it's likely to put you six feet under a tombstone. This is the completely outrageous world of unlimited air racing, the world simulated in *Xtreme Air Racing*.

Emergency landings are tough when the racetrack is over water.

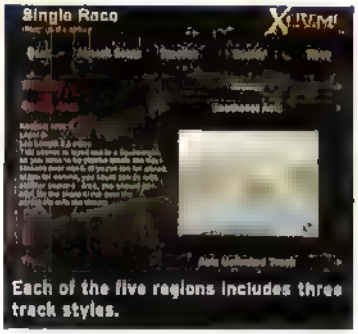
On the surface, it's a pretty easy simulation. Pick an aircraft, set the difficulty level, and then either enter a single race at one of 15 courses from around the world or compete in a season consisting of a progression of races. Wins earn you new tracks and aircraft.

Heck, you've flown combat flight sims. How hard can it be to simply fly around in circles on a track laid out by pylons, right? Heh heh heh.

The first surprise in this game is the depth in the aircraft setup. After you pick an airframe, you'll need to match it up with one of the available engines, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses. You also have to pick a prop to match your engine, and then you need to tweak a number of other settings that seem minor but have a significant impact on your plane's performance.

Once you're racing, the superb flight dynamics come into play. Yes, the action is wild and woolly, but *Xtreme Air Racing* is a sim, not an arcade game. The first time you pull in behind the pack of aircraft and get thrown out of the sky due to wake turbulence, you'll realize this is going to take some strategy. Graphics and sound are good, if not breathtaking, with the sound in particular coming into play as you hear the announcer's voice and your competitors' locations around you.

The viewing system works well for panning around your plane, but you may find that trying to negotiate a curve at hundreds of miles an hour while a few feet off the ground, without touching the planes around you, gives you precious little time to glance around. Fortunately the AI is superb, so crashes are usually a result of your ill-advised moves rather than your opponents'.



Each of the five regions includes three track styles.

Famed racer Bob Hoover provides verbal coaching during the race, and other newbie helps such as visible guide "hoops" can be toggled on and off. The previous, online-only version of the game lacked adequate documentation, but the new retail boxed version comes with an extensive 100-page manual.

This is a good time for flight sims, and *Xtreme Air Racing* is one of the reasons. This is a completely different, intense experience, and if you're a fan of either flight sims or racing, you owe it to yourself to give this game a try.

One of the Arctic courses.

VERDICT ★★★★½

A completely original, intense experience makes *Xtreme Air Racing* a must for both racing fans and flight sim fans.

Dmitri gets orders from an officer back in town.

Operation Flashpoint: Gold Upgrade/Red Hammer

The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming! By Tom Price

PUBLISHER Codemasters
DEVELOPER Bohemia Interactive URL www.codemasters.com/flashpoint
ESRB RATING Mature; blood, violence PRICE $15.00

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 400, 64MB RAM, 16MB video card, 450MB hard drive space
RECOMMENDED Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM, 32MB video card
MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT Internet, LAN (2-16 players)

There really isn't much more we can say about *Operation Flashpoint* that we didn't say in our Game of the Year write up. It's one of the best simulations of combat we've ever experienced and one of the most innovative game designs to come along. The gold upgrade improves upon the *Flashpoint* experience, bringing the version number up to 1.3 (1.4 is now available online) and adding the *Red Hammer* mission pack, which is a full campaign on the Russian side of the conflict. The patches not only enhance gameplay greatly (especially as they fix the memory leak problems of the original game), they also add a whole host of new units for you to play around with in the mission editor.

The *Red Hammer* missions fit nicely into the overall *Flashpoint* oeuvre by following the same basic events as the original campaign, but from another perspective. You play as Dmitri Lukin, a grizzled veteran of numerous Soviet conflicts and former member of the elite Spetznaz who has been bucked down to private due to insubordination. You start as the Russian offensive on Everon begins, and go all the way to the ultimate American victory at the end of the parallel campaigns, with plenty of plot twists along the way.

The *Red Hammer* campaign, like *Cold War Crisis*, is structured as a series of individual missions broken up by well-scripted, in-engine cut-scenes. The biggest difference is that *Red Hammer* centers on a single character and therefore is more focused on foot soldiering. It would have been nice to see a mission with the Su-TK Frog foot—the U.S.S.R.'s answer to the A-10—and a mission with the Hind Mi-TK, the big bad ass Russian attack chopper, but the mission editor makes it easy to throw together a quick sortie or attack run.

The only thing to mar the experience is the occasional scripting error, which I rarely encountered. Don't bother trying to tackle the *Red Hammer* missions without spending a lot of time first with the original game. But if you're an experienced *Flashpoint* gamer, you'll want to pick this up ASAP.

The Hind Mi-TK is one nasty customer.

VERDICT ★★★★½

The best game of last year just keeps getting better.

POWER

MAFIA

Historical personalities like Napoleon make their mark and then fade into history. *EU2* captures them all.

Europa Universalis II

I am the King of Siam, the King of Siam, I am! By John Fletcher

PUBLISHER Strategy First
DEVELOPER Paradox Entertainment
WEB www.strategyfirst.com
ESRB RATING Everyone
PRICE $39.99

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II, 64MB RAM, 375MB hard drive space
RECOMMENDED Pentium II 450, 128MB RAM, multiplayer LAN, Internet (2-8 players)

Machiavelli said, "Nothing makes a Prince so well thought of as to undertake great enterprises and give striking proofs of his capacity." If that sounds easy, just try *Europa Universalis II*, Strategy First's excellent follow-up to *Europa Universalis*. This is a delicately balanced historical strategy game that knows its history and how to extrapolate alternatives from it. It's a spellbinding romp from the Renaissance through the Napoleonic Wars.

Like its predecessor, *EU2* is a thinker's game. It's a boardgame at heart, and the layout is designed to impart information, from the status of the most minor trading post to the religious preferences of every country in the world. Fortunately, the information is easy to access, understand, and use. After some preference changes regarding message frequency, *EU2* stays out of the way and simply lets you play.

EU2 is a spellbinding romp from the Renaissance through the Napoleonic Wars.

The hardest part of *EU2* is getting your feet under you. It's easy to be overwhelmed by the myriad countries at the beginning of each scenario, especially if you take advantage of the expanded ability to play any country you want. Check your starting position carefully. Resist the urge to simply hurl armies at your neighbors. You will quickly find yourself isolated and besieged, your national stability in the toilet, your economy in shambles, and internal rebellions seemingly endless.

The diplomacy, trade, and colonization features are all expanded. In one of the most satisfying games I played, I engaged in only one major war and spent the rest of the time exploring these features. When you do choose the path of war, the expanded peace terms open a whole new array of options. Negotiating a favorable peace is important to waging a successful war, and other countries will be keeping a close eye on how much you squeeze from a vanquished foe.

There are a few weaknesses in *EU2*. Inflation can get out of hand in the longer scenarios, and there's nothing you can do about it. Some features, such as missionary work or high-level diplomacy, cost so much that they become impractical. Occasionally poor spelling and grammar expose the game's non-English-speaking origins. But the minor game balance issues can be dealt with easily, and Strategy First is already providing patches. In any event, these flaws don't really detract from your enjoyment.

This review only scratches the surface of the *EU2* universe. Back in the old days, we would have called *EU2* a "monster game"—big and complex. Like the best monster games, it is also fun and engrossing, an experience to remember.

VERDICT ★★★★½

Who knew imperial hegemony could be such good clean fun?

GAME PATCHES

Revisionist History

CGW looks at patches

By Thomas L. McDonald

Aliens vs. Predator 2

"Bad Game Goes Good" stories give me a warm, snuggly feeling deep inside. *Aliens Versus Predator 2* wasn't a bad game per se, but its problems did tend to collect at one end of the lint trap-wretched multiplayer. To Monolith's credit, they quickly released three patches—v.1.0.9.2, v.1.0.9.3 and Single-Player Map Update #1—that should have the cumulative effect of actually changing opinions of the game.

The biggest news concerns the multiplayer front. Now that it's not broken, we can see *AvP2* MP support for what it is, an outstanding experience that deserves a loyal following. This is largely due to the nature of the beast: Marines versus aliens versus predators makes for some truly hair-raising multiplayer. The main problems in the release were terrible lag and maddening character frame-rates that made accurate attacks impossible. The first patch swept these away with a single wave of its magic 5MB-download wand by lowering object position updates and smoothing out character movement. Monolith also added better server and game management features, resulting in a solid online game experience.

Another, less pronounced problem was single-player scripted-action bugs. A good half-dozen have been fixed. The occasional LithTech visual glitches remain, but there's nothing show-stopping. If reports of dodgy multiplayer spooked you away, now is the time to give *AvP2* a go. You can use the game's update utility to grab the latest patch.

This is the arena, where you drag your balls through a hoop.

Clusterball

Why don't they just write the jokes for us? By Tom Price

PUBLISHER Strategy First
DEVELOPER Daydream Software
URL www.clusterball.com
ESRB RATING Everyone; mild violence
PRICE $29.95

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 170MB hard drive space, 64MB RAM, 8MB video card
RECOMMENDED Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM, 32MB video card
MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT LAN, Internet (2-8 players)

The title of this game offers up so many joke possibilities that it's not even worth the effort to make one. It's just too damn easy. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised at all if the name were a ploy to get reviewers to burn word counts on juvenile puns (huh-huh, he said "cluster") instead of going into how weak this game is. Don't worry, I will.

Clusterball is a futuristic, arena-type sports game that involves piloting what looks like a flying Cadillac around large open spaces, picking up balls that you must pull behind you as you try to fly through a goal. Meanwhile, competitors try to disrupt you or knock your balls off. Seriously.

Clusterball is designed to be a multiplayer game, although there is single player play against bots. The game has potential, with interesting weapons and bizarre arenas, but

The control is so god-awful that any redeeming quality in the game will be wasted on frustration.

Will you look at those balls!

The control is so god-awful that any redeeming quality in the game will be wasted on frustration. Just trying to get your ship through the goal is enough to make you quit, uninstall, and light the CD-ROM on fire.

This game is simply a poorly executed excuse for what might have been a good time. *Clusterball* is one serious cluster fu...No. I said I wouldn't do it, and I won't.

VERDICT ★★☆☆☆

The most fun you'll have with this game is mocking the title.

RESPECT

Frank Herbert's Dune

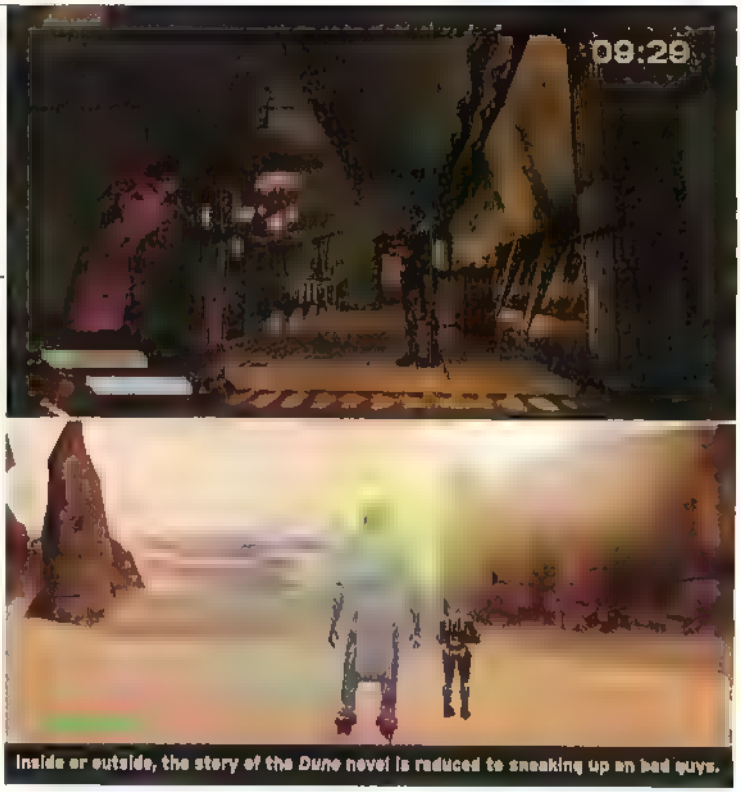
Even David Lynch's *Dune* was better than this **By Charles Ardai**

Publisher Dreamcatcher Interactive
Developer Widescreen Games
Contact www.dreamcatcher.games.com/games/dune/dune.html
Rating Teen; violence
Price $29.99

Min. system Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM, 550MB hard drive space
Recommended Pentium III 500, 64MB RAM
Multiplayer None

Why is it that some of the worst computer games ever made have been adaptations of some of the best science-fiction novels ever written? I couldn't tell you. But if you're a cynic like me, you won't be surprised to learn that the same game design curse that resulted in stinkers like *Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles* has now generated what may well be the worst game adaptation of a classic yet, *Frank Herbert's Dune*.

Let's get one thing straight right away. This is *not* Frank Herbert's *Dune*. Frank Herbert's *Dune* was a complex, subtle story about political intrigue between warring families out to control the one valuable harvest of an otherwise barren planet. This is Dreamcatcher Interactive's *Dune*, and though it is nominally based on the turgid but relatively faithful miniseries that aired some months back on the Sci-Fi Channel, it manages to reduce the epic story of *Dune* to sneaking up behind a never-ending series of bad guys and slitting their throats. Oh, there's more than that—sometimes the bad guys notice you, and then you have to shoot them with a ray gun (for some reason, your knife doesn't work if you try to use it on someone who's facing you). And once in a while you have to copy down a code from one screen and enter it into another in order to unlock a door. But if you're looking for richer storytelling than that, you'd better look for it in some other game.



Inside or outside, the story of the *Dune* novel is reduced to sneaking up on bad guys.

The game's one saving grace is the dramatic sandworms.

You'll also have to look elsewhere even if all you want is solid action-adventure gameplay. *Dune* uses a third-person perspective so poorly designed that in almost every scene you end up with your view blocked, and a control system so abysmally awkward that you continually find yourself stuck to other characters, objects, and walls. The decision to limit your ammunition so as to force you to be stealthy is fine by itself, but it becomes truly unbearable when combined with the utter lack of a save function: The game is saved only when you complete each mission, and naturally it doesn't contain lots of short missions, but a half-dozen long ones. Try replaying one of these sneak-and-shoot obstacle courses from the beginning just because you ran out of ammunition at the very end the last time, and you'll know a torment that puts the test of the *gom jabbar* to shame.

What of the animated cut-scenes between missions? Well, aside from the fact that they're packed full of inarticulate exposition that is sure to confuse the *Dune* novice while boring anyone who has read the book, they are ugly and there's no way to cut them short, even if you've seen them before.

Look elsewhere if you want solid action-adventure gameplay.

Is there nothing this game does right? No, nothing. It earns its one star for its toothy sandworms, which manage to pull off the neat trick of being simultaneously penile and a perfect specimen of *vagina dentata*.

VERDICT ★☆☆☆☆

It's not just that reading the book is more fun—giving yourself a paper cut with each page of the book would be more fun. And that's 535 paper cuts.

Our comatose heroine displays the game's two biggest—and only—assets.

Druuna: Morbus Gravis

Hooters, boobs, and breasts breasts breasts! By Charles Ardai

PUBLISHER Microids
DEVELOPER Artematica URL www.druuna-thegame.com ESRB RATING Mature: blood and gore, violence, mature sexual themes PRICE $39.95

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM, 500MB hard drive space RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT None

You almost have to admire a game that tries to distract you from its fundamental incompetence by sticking a topless woman in the opening scene. It doesn't work, but my lord, what chutzpah! Sure, computer gaming has been breast-obsessed ever since graphics became high-res enough to render curves, but even the Lara Crofts of this world generally had decent games to inhabit. *Druuna*, a European adventure game based on the X-rated graphic novels by Paolo Eleuteri Serpieri, has to be some sort of a first: all breasts, no game.

It wouldn't be so bad if *Druuna* at least knew that's what it was and just showed you a sideshow of Serpieri's sexy artwork. That wouldn't be a game, and we wouldn't be writing about it in *CGW*, but at least it might be a product that satisfied someone. Instead, what Artematica has done is tone down the sexual content from XXX to PG-13 and surround it with a game that isn't just bad, it's literally unplayable.

Druuna has to be some sort of a first: all breasts, no game.

Lest you think I exaggerate, let me cite a few examples. The key that's supposed to make Druuna jump doesn't. The keys that supposedly pick up objects and add them to your inventory don't—or at least they frequently didn't on my computer. The movement keys that are supposed to control Druuna do, but with a lag that feels like one of those drunk-driving simulators. The main interface, which is supposed to be a tool that allows you to steer through Druuna's mind while she lies in a coma, relies on the sort of mindless "press the right arrow key when you see a flash on the right side of the screen" gameplay that made *Dragon's Lair* so much fun.

And then there's the story. Although I doubt anyone will be able to stand the game long enough to delve into it, if you do, you'll find a squalid, familiar yarn about an apocalyptic future and the underdressed heroine out to set it all right. Does she succeed? Odds are you'll never know. This dungheap of a game fills six CDs, and life's too short.

J. Lo, er, Druuna, faces off against some monsters in one of the game's cut-scenes.

VERDICT ★☆☆☆☆

The strongest argument for a zero-star game since *Survivor: The Interactive Game*.

Battlecruiser Millennium

In space, no one can hear you flame **By Jeff Lackey**

PUBLISHER 3000AD, Inc.
DEVELOPER 3000AD, Inc.
URL www.bc3000ad.com
ESRB RATING Teen; violence
PRICE $49.95

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM (128MB minimum for Win 2000/XP), 500MB hard drive space
RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM
MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT None

There's never been a computer game series that was more of a lightning rod for controversy than the *Battlecruiser* franchise. The initial game, *Battlecruiser 3000AD*, was released by publisher Take 2 in a completely unfinished state. Also, the developer, Derek Smart, has participated in and been the subject of endless Usenet flame fests.

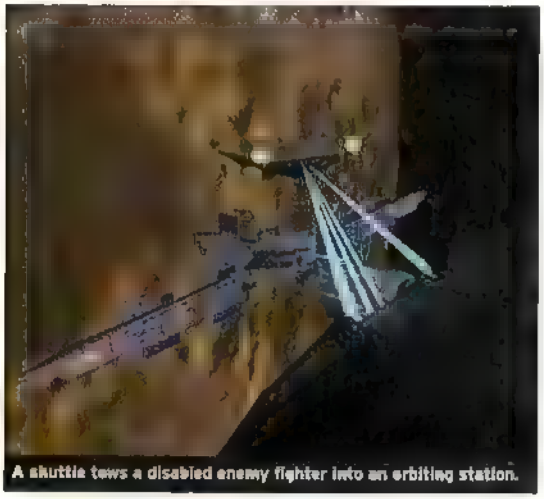
This is not a review of *BC 3000AD*, nor a review of Derek Smart. This is a review of *Battlecruiser Millennium*, a game that makes a Herculean attempt to be the ultimate space simulator. A game in which you can play as a fleet commander, a battlecruiser commander, or a space fighter pilot. You can even be a space marine, fighting it out in first-person mode in space or on a planet surface. While the FPS mode won't make you uninstall *Operation Flashpoint*, the fact that you can land on a planet and then jump out of your ship and run around does indicate the desired breadth of the game. The universe is huge, inhabited by about a dozen races, and your career choices are broad, including roles such as military commander, trader, raider, explorer, mercenary, and more.

However, this is absolutely not a game for everyone. The variety of activities is equally enormous: deploying mining drones on planets or moons to collect minerals for profits, sending ground vehicles filled with marines to the surface of a planet for a battle, towing a disabled enemy spaceship to a friendly star base for fame and profit, baiting infiltrators on your ship, and much more. Once you understand the interface, it works well, but you'll only be able to figure it out after investing significant study time. The graphics aren't state of the art but are good enough. Sound is also in the just good enough category (but of course, there shouldn't any be in space). Multiplayer, which conceivably could be where the game's breadth really shines, is planned but not yet included.

Coming home for repair and resupply.

Battlecruiser Millennium is a game you'll either love or loathe.

You can play as the commander of a huge battlecruiser or step into the space suit of a marine.


A shuttle tows a disabled enemy fighter into an orbiting station.

While there are scripted campaigns, what makes *BCM* a game you'll either love or hate is roam mode, the true heart of the game. Here, you have absolute freedom. What the game provides is a huge, active universe in which you can role-play to the limits of your imagination. However, it's only in your imagination that any type of story will unfold. There are no news stories informing you of, say, a new alliance between two rival races, no communications with other forces, no narrative of events occurring in your area. For many players, this will translate into a barren and uninteresting universe. But for some players this will be heaven, as they create their own epic role-playing storyline and freely roam the universe, uncover hidden civilizations, battle advanced starfighters, discover and profit from remote sources of raw materials, trade in illegal cargo, and so on.

Battlecruiser Millennium is thus a game you'll probably either love or loathe. Precisely what you would expect from someone as controversial as Derek Smart.

VERDICT ★★★½

***Battlecruiser Millennium* provides an open, free-form role-playing universe that some will love. Others will find it too difficult and unstructured.**

It's Nothing Personal

POWER

RESPECT

FAMILY

mafia.godgames.com

RP
Visit www.esrb.org or call 1-800-771-3772 for Rating Information.

Rally Trophy

When men were men and cars were nervous... By Gian Vitzthum

Sitting out a Russian sun-shower in a Ford Cortina.

PUBLISHER JoWood Productions
DEVELOPER Bugbear Entertainment
URL www.rallytrophy.com
ESRB RATING Everyone
PRICE $29.99

REQUIREMENTS 300MHz CPU, 64MB RAM, 3D-accelerated video card with 8MB RAM, DirectX 8.0, 8X CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS 650MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 3D-accelerated video card with 32MB RAM, 24X CD-ROM drive, force feedback steering wheel and pedals
MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT LAN, Internet via GameSpy (2-6 players)

Rally Trophy, the first title by Finnish developer Bugbear Entertainment, is a driving game forcing its way into an already crowded genre by way of a heavy dose of nostalgia. Published by JoWood Productions, the game focuses on European automotive legends from the 1960s and 1970s like the Mini Cooper, the Ford Cortina, a litany of Italian cars, plus notable Swedish and French makes.

Visually, the game is stunning, with highly detailed vehicles and excellent damage representation. Sunglare effects and night driving stages—especially in snow-covered Sweden or barren Kenya—are truly superb and complement sumptuous landscapes in other regions. Sounds are also well done, though not nearly as impressive as the graphics.

While *Rally Trophy*'s physics engine has been compared to that of *Grand Prix Legends*, the gameplay is vastly different. Casual gamers will breathe a sigh of relief that one wrong move won't spell disaster,

Stunning vistas and detailed cars are a definite highlight of *Rally Trophy*.

while purists will be disappointed that vehicles can continue racing despite severe accidents and that engines seem bulletproof. Although a car's suspension and other vital components can be damaged, the need to throw caution to the wind isn't much of a departure from most other rally games. The cars in *Rally Trophy* are more of a handful, however, because many have rear-wheel drive, are heavy, and are poorly sprung. A fair amount of freedom of movement across the terrain is definitely a gaming plus and there are plenty of roadside obstacles to keep a driver honest. Force feedback (particularly in opposite lock) is well implemented and a real asset—try learning to perform the "Scandinavian flick," a switchback process of sliding laterally into the apex of turns.

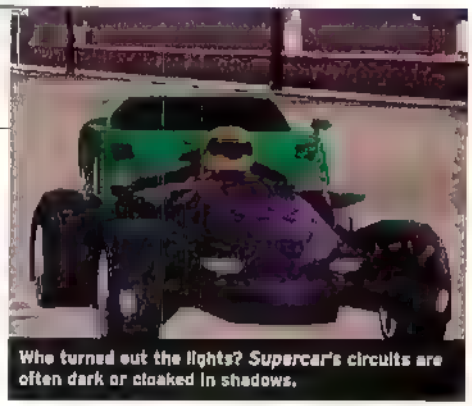
Placing well in races unlocks rallies in countries like Finland and Switzerland, as well as high-performance cars. There are 32 stages and 11 distinct models (a total of 22 with factory team variants). Multiplayer allows access to all tracks and cars in expert mode, supporting up to six players. Ten special stages are available for head-to-head racing but—just as in real rallying—the game is mostly about beating the clock, not bashing into other cars.

Overall *Rally Trophy* delivers a great deal of fun and is equal parts simulation and driving game. It's a high cut above its peers in most respects, despite the lack of a replay editor. It distinguishes itself from the pack by its visual effects, excellent physics, and a longing backward glance at vintage cars. Clearly a labor of love by Bugbear, all but the most jaded driving enthusiasts will enjoy this game.

VERDICT ★★★★☆
An exciting rally driving game that's as close as the genre has ever come to a simulation.

Supercar Street Challenge

It's neither super nor a challenge. Discuss By Gord Goble


Who turned out the lights? *Supercar*'s circuits are often dark or cloaked in shadows.

PUBLISHER Activision
DEVELOPER Exakt Entertainment
URL www.activision.com
ESRB RATING Everyone
PRICE $39.99

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 350, 64MB RAM, 500MB hard drive space, 16MB video card
RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM, 32MB video card
MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT Hotseat (2 players)

Had it been released before games such as *Need for Speed: Porsche Unleashed* revolutionized arcade road racing, Activision's *Supercar Street Challenge* wouldn't seem quite so primitive. As it is, *Supercar* is a throwback to a time when drivers pinned the throttle, rarely tapped the brakes, and used trackside barriers and competitors merely as directional adjustment tools. The game's one truly distinctive feature, a vehicular design suite in which players can purportedly devise their own state-of-the-art concept car, is geared to insignificant accessorizing rather than performance enhancements and complete makeovers.

Supercar cars never, ever accrue damage. Nor do they sport rearview mirrors, in-car cockpit perspectives, or even a hint of reactive suspension. And although the game does convey a frightening sense of speed and offers several exciting moments of wheel-whacking, door-to-door lunacy, most drivers will have fully explored all 23 dark and shadowy urban environments within a few hours and quite possibly suffered through a mountain of frame-rate jitters along the way. That multiplayer *Supercar* is restricted to two players on a single computer somehow doesn't seem surprising.

Fast and temporarily thrilling, *Supercar Street Challenge* nevertheless lacks the depth and polish today's racers demand. Priced surprisingly high at $39.99, it is more supine than super.

VERDICT ★★☆☆☆
Needs more than just speed.

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When Less Is More

Five 2.1 Speaker Systems Are Put to the Test By William O'Neal

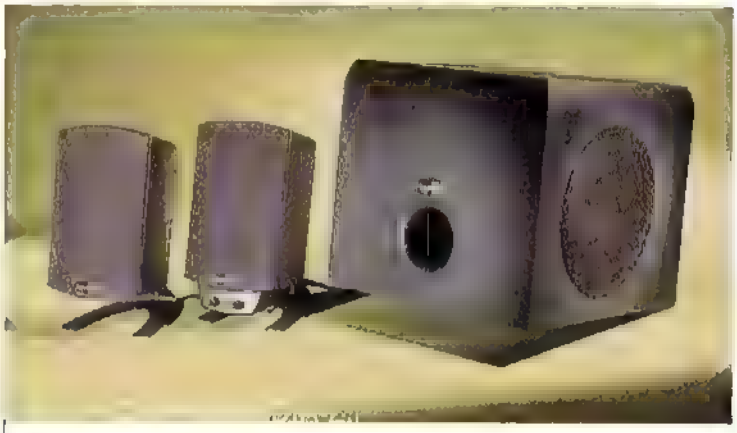
With all the 4.1 and 5.1 speaker systems out there, it's easy to forget that most people don't really have much of a need for top-of-the-line speakers. Not to mention that there's a dearth of games out there that support anything more than your basic left and right channels. To that end, we give you *CGW*'s somewhat-definitive guide to 2.1 speaker systems.

CAMBRIDGE SOUNDWORKS MEGAWORKS 210D

At nearly $300, the Cambridge MegaWorks are the best-sounding speakers in this roundup—no surprise there. But when it comes to technology, it's also no surprise that you usually get what you pay for. Designed for the serious audiophile, the MegaWorks pump an amazing 270 total watts of power (150 watts alone to the 8-inch subwoofer). We hooked the MegaWorks up to our Xbox and the clarity of sound seriously added to the enjoyment of *Halo*. We also hooked 'em up to one of our lab machines for some serious *Counter-Strike* testing, and these babies never disappointed. Games behind us, we tested the MegaWorks on anything we could think of—MP3 playback, DVD movies, you name it. If you're looking for a 2.1 setup that can hold its own, then the MegaWorks are definitely for you.

ALTEC LANSING 621 2.1

The Altec Lansing 621s are formidable. The massive subwoofer (which pumps out a whopping 50 watts RMS) is the size of my CPU and is reminiscent of the subs you see with more complicated setups. Thankfully all this power and size isn't for naught. It came as no shock that the 621s were great to use for gaming, and the remote control dongle comes with a nifty little stand that keeps it from falling victim to the cable forest that doubles as my desk. At a price of $180, the 621s aren't necessarily what you'd call cheap, but we doubt that you'd blow these guys out anytime soon.



Klipsch's ProMedia 2.1s are exactly what we expected—awesome! Basically, Klipsch took their vaunted ProMedia 4.1s, removed two of the satellites, and decreased the overall system power (200 watts compared to the 400 watts that the ProMedia 4.12s boast). The control is simple and closely resembles the one on the front of one of the ProMedia 4.1 satellites. MP3s sounded great on the 2.1s, as did games and DVD movies. The Klipschs aren't cheap, at the same price as the less popular Altec Lansings. But at higher volumes, the Klipsch subwoofer shows its smaller size, while the Altec Lansings just keep on bumping.

Because they come in at a mere $50, it's almost unfair to ding the Logitechs for their low power. And for most practical applications, they work fine. They're currently hooked up to one of the game machines in our lab, and while they haven't garnered the accolades that the Cambridges, Klipschs, or Altec Lansings have, no one's complained about them, either. Whether that says something about the quality of the Z-340s or proves that sound isn't the most important thing on gamers' minds, it remains that these speakers are $50 well spent.

Replacing the Monsoon MM-700s are the thin, little speakers that could. Boasting Monsoon's PFT (Planar Focus Technology), which aims to lower distortion, the MM-702s also have adjustable desktop stands that make it easier to angle the sound. They offer good mids and highs, which were great for playing *Counter-Strike*, but I would've liked more power from the subwoofer. Of course, not everybody listens to hip-hop and dance hall all day, but when you're watching *The Thin Red Line* or tossing 'nades in CS, it's nice to hear that low, thunderous boom. That said, these speakers are still a great option.

The Ratings

PRODUCT	Price	System Power	Miscellany	Verdict
Cambridge SoundWorks MegaWorks 210D www.cambridgesoundworks.com	$300	270 watts	One digital input; two analog inputs, treble and bass controls; remote control	★★★★½
Altec Lansing 621 2.1 www.alteclansing.com	$180	200 watts	Two analog inputs, remote contro	★★★★½
Klipsch ProMedia 2.1 www.klipsch.com	$179	200 watts		★★★★
Monsoon MM-702 www.monsoonaudio.com	$149	49 watts	Remote control	★★★★
Logitech Z-340 2.1 www.logitech.com	$50	33 watts		★★★

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  Klipsch® ProMedia™ 5.1 THX 500-Watt
  Speaker & Subwoofer System
  16X/40X DVD ROM Drive
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- SoundBlaster® Audigy™ 5.1 Gamer Sound Card
  Klipsch® ProMedia™ 5.1 THX 500-Watt
  Speaker & Subwoofer System
  16X/40X DVD-ROM Drive
- Plexwriter 40X/12X/40X CD-RW IDE
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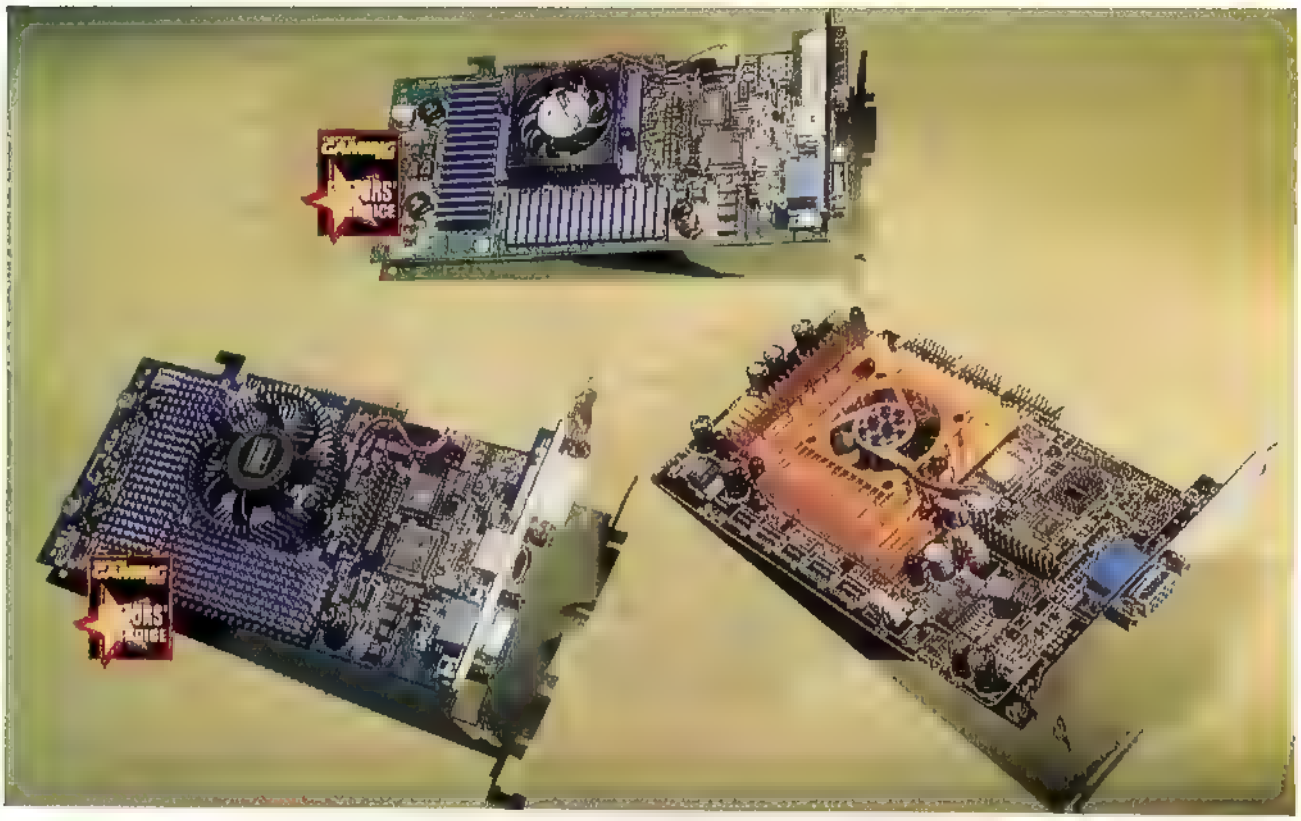

Splitting Hairs

What do you do when you get your hands on three GeForce3Ti 500 cards? Test them and try to find something that differentiates them from one another By William O'Neal

Xtasy 6964
[illegible] VisionTek
www.visiontek.com
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[illegible] TV/S-video
digital video-out
(DVI-I)
★★★★★

Hercules 3D
Prophet III Titanium
500 [illegible]
Guillemot
www.hercules.com
$329
[illegible] TV/S-video,
digital video-out
(DVI-I)
★★★★½

V8200 T5
[illegible] ASUS
www.asus.com
$333
[illegible] N/A
★★★★☆

My predecessor Dave Salvator used to jokingly refer to *CGW*'s hardware section as "Which 3D Card Should I Buy?" Throughout the history of 3D gaming, the answer to this question has been either simple ("Just buy a Voodoo card") or way too complex ("Should I get a Matrox, S3, ATI, 3dfx, or an nVidia card?"). We've entered another era of relative simplicity, with the options being a 64MB GeForce3Ti 500 or a 64MB ATI Radeon 8500 card. In our March issue we concluded that the GeForce3Ti 500 is your best bet, which leads to the question, "Which GeForce3Ti 500 card to get?" We got three such cards from VisionTek, Hercules, and ASUS. Not surprisingly these cards are more similar than dissimilar, with the only real differences being output options, a few frames per second, and a few bucks.

The VisionTek card that we tested tied with the ASUS as the best overall performer. Add in that the VisionTek card has VGA, TV/S-video, digital video-out (DVI-I), and the lowest price we could find ($303 on pricewatch.com), it's hands-down the winner. VisionTek doesn't bundle their cards with games, their theory being that hardcore gamers already own the games that they want to play.

The Hercules 3D Prophet III Titanium 500 is almost identical to the VisionTek card. Like the VisionTek it boasts VGA, TV/S-video, and digital video-out (DVI-I). While its benchmarks weren't as high as the ASUS and VisionTek's, the card is still fast—and anyone who thinks one or two frames per second in *Quake III Arena* matters is just splitting hairs. Like the VisionTek card, the 3D Prophet doesn't ship with any games.

Unlike the other cards in this triumvirate, the ASUS GeForce3Ti 500 cards come in multiple flavors, including ones with TV/S-video and those wacky 3D glasses. The card we tested, The Pure, is as basic as they come and ships with just a VGA-out. Even though its benchmark scores were about as high as the VisionTek's, the ASUS' lack of options landed it solidly in third.

MODEL	V8200 T5	Xtasy 6964	3D Prophet III Titanium 500
Quake III: Arena 1024x768x16	202	203	204
Quake III: Arena 1024x768x32	198	199	200
Quake III: Arena 1600x1200x32	99	99	99
Unreal Tournament 1024x768x16	63	64	64
Unreal Tournament 1024x768x32	62	62	62
Unreal Tournament 1600x1200x32	58	58	58
Expendable 16-bit	97	97	97
Expendable 32-bit	96	96	96
USAF	59	59	59
3D GameGauge 2.5	83	82	83
3DWinMark2000	273	276	271
3DMark2001	8193	8191	8175
FINAL SCORE*	2858	2858	2843

TECH MEDIC

Which Graphics Card Should I Buy?

Hey man, how're you? My question is simple: I have a 3dfx Voodoo 3 3000 with TV-out. Is it worth it to upgrade to a GeForce2 card? There are dozens of GF2 models out there (ASUS alone has five to eight). What kind of stuff should I look for in a GF2 to be worth the upgrade?

Claudio Eduardo

Yeah, it'll be worth it. If price is an issue, check out any of the GeForce2TI cards. They cost less than $150 and they'll kick that Voodoo card's butt. As for other stuff, get a card that has TV-out if you want to keep using that feature.

EverQuest Is for Fancy-Lads. Don't Play It

I am a gamer who is very much into *EverQuest*. Sadly, my computer is very bad and the lag makes me want to stop playing. I am on a limited budget and am hoping you can tell me the least I could pay for a machine with a 1GHz processor, 512MB of RAM, a 40GB hard drive, and a 64MB 3D card, if I bought only the CPU and didn't buy monitor, printer, and stuff.

Wannabe Gamer (Alex)

I just went to Dell's site and put together a machine that matches most of your specs with a 1.1GHz Celeron CPU for about $800. Beyond that, though, you really shouldn't be playing *EverQuest*.

Dilemmas, Dilemmas!

What do you suggest for a gamepad? Also, do you prefer blondes or brunettes?

Billy Tooth

Get a Microsoft SideWinder USB. As for hair color, I like redheads like our managing editor, Dana.

Which Motherboard Should I Buy?

Should I upgrade to an ASUS A7A266 or an nVidia nForce motherboard? I am currently using a Pentium III 800, and I'm thinking about upgrading my CPU to an AMD 1.4GHz Athlon.

Josh Harvill

I would go for an ASUS A7M266 motherboard and get DDR memory. If you'd rather go the SDRAM route, then the A7A266 will suit you just fine.

Another Doorstop

My computer is in desperate need of an overhaul. I have a Pentium II 333MHz with 96MB of SDRAM, a 32X CD-ROM drive, a 15GB hard drive, and an old 16MB Voodoo 3. What do you suggest? Should I upgrade my CPU or should I just buy a new one? I have a price range around $1,100. Also, is there anything that I can keep from my old computer?

Coby Coffee

The only things that I would keep are the 15GB hard drive and the CD-ROM drive. Other than that, my advice to you would be to buy a new computer. For $1,100 you could get a sweet rig from an outfit like Dell.

Time to Upgrade, Buddy

I'm running a computer with a 700MHz AMD Duron processor, 128MB of pc133 RAM, a Transcend TS-AKT4 motherboard with two free SDRAM slots, a 20GB hard drive, and a 64MB ATI Rage Fury Maxx video card. I thought my computer was okay until it received a sad score of 1100 in the demo version of 3DMark2001 from MadOnion. How can I upgrade my computer for $150 (though less would be better)?

Robbie

You can get a GeForce2TI card and an additional 128MB of RAM for less than $200.

WIL

Killer Rigs

Dueling recipes for building the ultimate gaming machine

By William O'Neal

Last month we tried to get AMD and Intel to participate in a CGW Deathmatch. For reasons unknown to us here at CGW, both Intel and AMD declined. That left us one choice: build identical Power Rigs based on each company's flagship CPU.

With the recent release of DDR-based motherboards for Pentium 4 processors, building comparable machines is now easier than ever. Both machines boast 512MB Crucial PC2100 DDR RAM, 64MB VisionTek GeForce3Ti 500 graphics cards, Antec SX-635 cases, 30GB IBM Deskstar 7200-rpm hard drives, 24/10/40 CD-RW drives, 16/40 DVD-ROM drives, SoundBlaster Audigy Gamer sound cards, and Windows XP Home Edition.

The thing that amazed us the most is how similar our two machines are in both price and performance. We weren't surprised that the Pentium 4 dominated the Athlon in *Quake III: Arena*, but while 188 fps may not be as fast as 203 fps, it's safe to say that most people wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Both machines beat the hell out of MadOnion's 3DMark2001, with the Intel machine scoring 8073 and the Athlon rig coming in at 7971.

Choosing one of these machines over the other is more an exercise in brand loyalty than anything else, as the $200 price difference is negligible when you're dropping nearly three Gs. But if I had to choose one over the other, I'd go with the Pentium 4. Why? Because it *is* faster than the Athlon, and I didn't have to pay for it.

	Intel	AMD
Quake III: Arena 1024x768x16	203.6	188.5
Quake III: Arena 1024x768x32	199.6	186.1
Unreal Tournament 1024x768x16	46.38	50.57
Expendable 16-bit	97.32	114.1
Expendable 32-bit	96.18	112.5
Re-Volt 16-bit	266.6	265.5
Re-Volt 32-bit	267.7	265.8
NFL Fever 16-bit	84.44	88.76
3D GameGauge 2.5	136.82	139.4
3DWinMark 2000	276	263
3DMark2001	8073	7971
TOTAL SCORE	2020.41	1979.33

We built identical Power Rigs based on Intel's and AMD's flagship CPUs.

COMPONENT	MANUFACTURER	PRICE
CPU	2.2GHz Pentium 4	$562
Memory	512MB Crucial PC2100 DDR RAM	$150
Graphics Card	64MB VisionTek GeForce3Ti 500	$320
Motherboard	Intel D845BG	$150
Case	Antec SX-635	$100
3.5" Floppy Drive	Teac	$20
Hard Drive	30GB IBM Deskstar 7200 rpm	$150
CD-RW Drive	Plextor 24/10/40	$175
DVD-ROM Drive	Pioneer DVD500-M 16/40 ATAPI	$75
Monitor	22" NEC MultiSync FE1250+ (Black)	$700
Keyboard	Microsoft Internet Keyboard Pro	$40
Mouse	Wireless IntelliMouse Explorer	$65
Sound Card	SoundBlaster Audigy Gamer	$100
Speakers	Klipsch ProMedia 4.1	$300
Joystick	Saitek Cyborg USB Gold Stick	$40
Gamepad	Microsoft SideWinder GamePad USB	$25
Operating System	Windows XP Home Edition	$200
TOTAL		$3172

COMPONENT	MANUFACTURER	PRICE
CPU	1.7GHz AMD Athlon XP 2000+	$350
Memory	512MB Crucial PC2100 DDR RAM	$150
Graphics Card	64MB VisionTek GeForce3Ti 500	$320
Motherboard	ASUS A7V266-E	$150
Case	Antec SX 635	$100
3.5" Floppy Drive	Teac	$20
Hard Drive	30GB IBM Deskstar 7200-rpm	$150
CD-RW Drive	Plextor 24/10/40	$175
DVD-ROM Drive	Pioneer DVD500-M 16/40 ATAPI	$75
Monitor	22" NEC MultiSync FE1250+ (Black)	$700
Keyboard	Microsoft Internet Keyboard Pro	$40
Mouse	Wireless IntelliMouse Explorer	$65
Sound Card	SoundBlaster Audigy Gamer	$100
Speakers	Klipsch ProMedia 4.1	$300
Joystick	Saitek Cyborg USB Gold Stick	$40
Gamepad	Microsoft SideWinder GamePad USB	$25
Operating System	Windows XP Home Edition	$200
TOTAL		$2960

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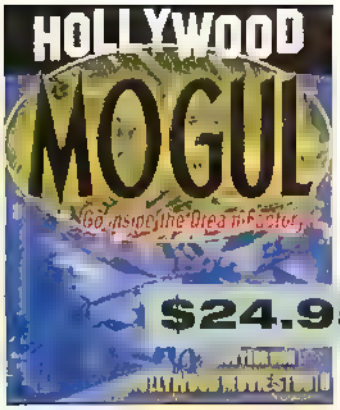

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Gamer's Edge

Winning for dummies [illegible] Nguyen

DIRTY TRICK O' THE MONTH

GHOST RECON

Hey, is your budget not generous enough to allow such titles as *Medal of Honor* to grace your PC? Wish there were a way for a copy of such a game to magically fall out of the sky and into your mailbox? Send us a Dirty Trick! We're looking for the nastiest, most devious tricks you've ever played on anyone online. Don't just roll out the same ol' *Counter-Strike* and *StarCraft* tricks—be utterly evil in more recent games, and get ready to score premium games. No good tricks will mean we have to keep all these *Medal of Honors*, so prove us wrong, and give these *MoH* boxes some good homes.

This works especially well for SAR games when you're on the team that is trying to keep the hostages from being rescued.

Pick a soldier who can use claymores and, once in a game, enter a building. Observe which way the door opens and plant a claymore behind it facing the door. Shut the door, and either scurry away from the building or hide behind it. If you are playing SAR and you stuck the claymore in a building with a hostage, the rescue team will have to go in to get the hostage. If you're playing a normal game, the other team will see your presence on the threat indicator and hopefully enter the building thinking you've camped out there. If you're close, as soon as you hear footsteps after the door opens, blow the claymore. If you ran away, use the zoom feature on your primary weapon to watch for the rescue team entering the building, and then switch to the claymore and blow it.

—Steve Stormont

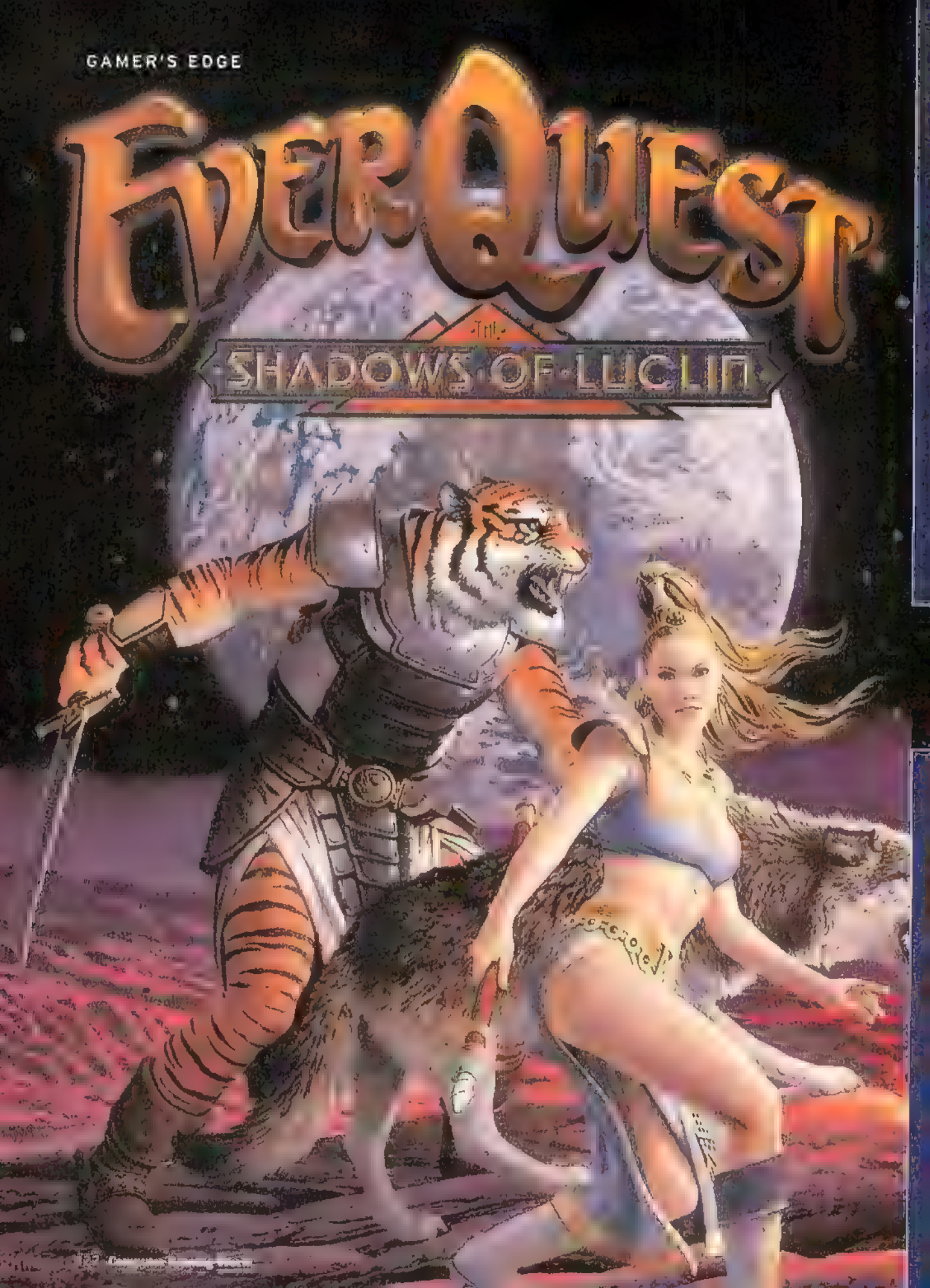
For being sneaky with the bombs, you get the chance to go back in time to a different war with your very own copy of *Medal of Honor Allied Assault*. Everyone else, send us your tips and keep earning games.

EVERQUEST: SHADOWS OF LUCLIN
See *EQ*'s new class and race. **PAGE 122**

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON
Destroy the enemy and then disappear like ghosts. **PAGE 127**

WIZARDRY 8
Helping newbies plan the best party of all. **PAGE 130**

IL-2 STURMOVIK
Master air combat without blowing yourself up. **PAGE 134**


GAMER'S EDGE
EverQuest
The
SHADOWS OF LUCLIN

EXCLUSIVE STRATEGY GUIDE FROM PRIMA GAMES AND CGW!

Figuring out what you want to be in the game is an integral part of your playing experience. ■ ■ ■ From the tough Barbarian warrior to the gentle Vah Shir beastlord, *EverQuest: The Shadows of Luclin* offers many alternatives for bringing your online character to life. ■ ■ ■

Even though you select race before class in the character creation screens, you should plan out your character in advance. Pick the class you want to play first and then select a race based on the most desirable skills and abilities from the races able to play that class. Remember, the race and class that you choose should reflect your playing style and overall goals. Some combinations, notably with regard to the spellcasting classes, are more difficult to master. Every race and class has strengths and weaknesses, and what one player perceives as a drawback might actually be an advantage in your eyes.

Another angle you should consider before investing a lot of time and effort is how you plan to develop your character. As you progress in level, you'll be able to spend your points on acquiring and improving skills. Check out the skills and advanced abilities of all the races and classes to figure out which abilities you want your character to attain later in life.

The Shadows of Luclin brings a new dimension to the realm of *EverQuest*—the addition of a new race, the Vah Shir, and a new class, beastlord. And the existing classes have seen a few changes since the release of *Ruins of Kunark*. Within each of the spell-casting classes, you'll also see new spells.

You may note that some classes have more new spells than other classes, but don't worry—this was part of the team's effort to balance magical abilities between classes.

Beastlord Class

Beastlords are a unique class bound to nature and combat. For the first few years of their career, they must wander the land and hone their natural abilities to navigate and communicate with animals. Much of this time is spent hunting and questing in order to acquire food, armor, and knowledge. With these tools in place, the adult beastlord is then ready to progress to the next stage of their career—the adoption of a lifelong companion.

While other classes with critters tend to select different pets based on their current situation, beastlords have a natural affinity for a single type of animal. Summoned pets are called "warders" and keep watch over their owners. Barbarian beastlords convoke wolves, Iksar use scaled wolves, and Vah Shir adopt tigers. Ogres team up with bears from the nearby Rathe Mountains, and Trolls call alligators from Innothule Swamp. Raised from a tender age by their masters, these beasts grow up with undying loyalty for their owners, and the feeling is usually mutual. A warder does not assume a persistent stance beside its owner. Instead, it lurks nearby and will appear at a moment's notice when summoned.

A lifelong pledge of protection and friendship bonds beastlord and warder, and the pledge remains unbroken through death. It is said that upon its owner's death, the warder of a beastlord will assume a steadfast post by its owner's side until resurrection can be managed. Also, unlike the pets available to

other casting classes, warders are not limited to your current zone and can travel freely about the world.

Capable of swift blows and buffing spells, beastlords are naturally drawn to fighting with their warder close by, of course. It's not uncommon to see a beastlord casting spells on a warder in between blows against an enemy. What the beastlord lacks in armor and weaponry is more than compensated for in the combined abilities of beastlord and warder. Together, they make a fierce, formidable fighting team.

Beastlord Skills

Beastlords are part mystical warriors—more in tune with nature than an everyday fighter—and part wild medicine man. They're similar to monks in that they're most dangerous when their hands are empty, but beastlords are also skilled in the use of smaller blunt or piercing weapons. The most dangerous tool at the beastlord's disposal, however, is their ability to summon a warder at level 9.

At lower levels, the beastlord is without a warder and closely resembles a monk fighter. Combat will be difficult, and it's best to stay with a group to ensure that you safely make it to the next level. Later, with more levels and a warder, the beastlord assumes the role of a shaman, buffing friends and pets while debuffing enemies. As the beastlord grows in power and level, so does the warder. Therein lies the real advantage to playing a beastlord—with buffing spells, the warder pet is one of the most powerful pets in the game.

Every good beastlord has a respectable repertoire of spells. The majority of a beastlord's spells are intended to buff, heal, or hasten a warder, although this class also has access to a number of other self-buffing and target debuffing spells.

Even without a warder, young beastlords can maintain a presence on the battlefield. Month upon month of wandering during the adolescent years gives the beastlord a high resistance to disease and frostbite and allows them time to build upon certain innate skills, including kicking, dual wielding, and riposting.

Beastlord Races

Members of the Barbarian, Iksar, Ogre, Troll, and Vah Shir races can train as beastlords, though as an agnostic race, the Vah Shir is probably the most neutrally aligned.

Beastlord Attributes

The beastlord is a hybrid class, blessed with the fighting ability of a monk and the spellcasting ability of a shaman. On the whole, beastlord-capable races are better at fighting than spellcasting and do not possess a particularly high intelligence or wisdom. In the case of the Vah Shir and Iksar, strength is also slightly lower. Beastlords tend to be limited to chain armor (at least until Beast Tamer's armor can be earned) and smaller hand weapons—but only because they need to stay light on their feet for silently stalking prey in the wilderness.

Stamina, agility, wisdom, and charisma are the primary attributes for a beastlord, and you should pay special attention to these attributes throughout your career. Given that spellcasting is a large part of a beastlord's existence at level 9 and higher, it's a good

Beastlord Starting Attributes

	Start Pts	STR	STA*	AGI*	DEX	WIS*	INT	CHA*
Barbarian	20	103	105	87	70	80	60	60
Iksar	20	70	80	95	85	90	75	60
Ogre	20	130	132	75	70	77	60	42
Troll	20	108	119	88	75	70	52	45
Vah Shir	20	90	85	95	70	80	65	70

* Primary beastlord attributes

Beastlord Spells

LEVEL	SPELL	SKILL
9	Cure Disease	Alteration
9	Endure Cold	Abjuration
9	Flash of Light	Divination
9	Inner Fire	Abjuration
9	Minor Healing	Alteration
9	Sharik's Replenishing	Alteration
9	Spirit of Sharik	Alteration
15	Cure Poison	Alteration
15	Endure Fire	Abjuration
15	Fleeting Fury	Abjuration
15	Keshuval's Rejuvenation	Alteration
15	Scale Skin	Abjuration
15	Sense Animals	Divination
15	Sicken	Conjuration
15	Spirit of Khati	Alteration
15	Spirit of Lightning	Alteration
15	Strengthen	Alteration
22	Drowsy	Alteration
22	Endure Poison	Abjuration
22	Light Healing	Alteration
22	Spirit of Bear	Abjuration
22	Spirit of Keshuval	Alteration
22	Spirit of the Blizzard	Alteration
22	Summon Drink	Conjuration
22	Tainted Breath	Conjuration
30	Herikol's Soothing	Alteration
30	Shrink	Alteration
30	Spirit of Herikol	Alteration
30	Spirit of Inferno	Alteration
30	Spirit of Wolf	Alteration
30	Spirit Sight	Divination
30	Spirit Strength	Alteration
30	Spirit Strike	Evocation
30	Summon Food	Conjuration
30	Turtle Skin	Abjuration
39	Endure Magic	Abjuration
39	Envenomed Breath	Conjuration
39	Healing	Alteration
39	Spirit of Monkey	Alteration
39	Spirit of Ox	Alteration
39	Spirit of the Scorpion	Alteration
39	Spirit of Yekan	Alteration
39	Summon Companion	Conjuration
39	Yekan's Quickening	Alteration
39	Yekan's Recovery	Alteration
49	Counteract Disease	Alteration
49	Frenzy	Abjuration
49	Invigor	Alteration
49	Invisibility	Divination
49	Listless Power	Alteration
49	Protect	Abjuration
49	Raging Strength	Alteration
49	Spirit of Kashek	Alteration
49	Spirit of Vermin	Alteration
49	Vigor of Zehkes	Alteration
50	Sha's Lethargy	Alteration
51	Ultravision	Divination
52	Aid of Khurenz	Alteration
52	Health	Alteration
52	Spirit of Wind	Alteration
52	Venom of the Snake	Conjuration
53	Deftness	Alteration
54	Resist Poison	Abjuration
54	Spirit of Omakin	Alteration
54	Spirit of the Storm	Alteration
54	Strength of Stone	Alteration
55	Chloroplast	Alteration
55	Omakin's Alacrity	Alteration
55	Sha's Restoration	Alteration
56	Incapacitate	Alteration
56	Shifting Shield	Abjuration
56	Spirit of Zehkes	Alteration
57	Greater Healing	Alteration
58	Nullify Magic	Abjuration
58	Spirit of Khurenz	Alteration
58	Talisman of Altuna	Alteration
59	Blizzard Blast	Evocation
59	Sha's Ferocity	Alteration
59	Spiritual Purity	Alteration
60	Alacrity	Alteration
60	Spirit of Kati Sha	Alteration
60	Spiritual Strength	Alteration

Beastlord Spellbook Tips

Practicing good spellbook organization is a critical part of playing a beastlord. Keep similar types of spells on a page and put the main spells at the top of your spellbook for quick access. Relegate your old spells to page 30 or after.

PAGES 1-2
- Type: Healing, Regeneration, Shield, Travel spells
- Examples: Healing, Inner Fire, Talisman of Altuna, SoW, Shrink, etc.
- Exclusions: Resistance buffs, pet buffs

PAGE 3
- Type: Self-buff spells
- Examples: Attribute-enhancing spells (those that boost strength, agility, etc.)

PAGE 4
- Type: Pet-buff spells
- Examples: Pet healing spells, Beastlord Pet Haste, Spirit of – (level buff spell)
- Exclusions: Pet procs

PAGES 5-6
- Type: Pet proc buffs
- Examples: Spirit of Lightning through Spirit of Storm

PAGE 7
- Type: Resistance spells
- Examples: Endure Poison/Cold/Magic/Fire

PAGE 8
- Type: Cure spells
- Examples: Cure Poison/Disease

PAGES 9-10
- Type: Utility spells
- Examples: Summon Food/Drink, Invigor, Sense Animals, Spirit Sight

PAGE 11
- Type: Direct damage, damage-over-time spells
- Examples: Spirit Strike, Sicken, Tainted Breath, etc.

PAGE 12
- Type: Debuff spells
- Examples: Sha's Lethargy, Incapacitate, Drowsy, Nullify Magic

SUGGESTED SPELLS TO PURCHASE

In the Vah Shir's home city, look for the Royal Palace. Go through the door to the right of the Raja, turn right, and go to the end of the hall. Turn left and proceed down the steps. You'll find yourself in an area with a few spell merchants. If you can afford them, buy the following spells to add to your book. You'll be glad you did.

- Yekan's Quickening
- Endure Magic
- Envenomed Breath
- Healing
- Spirit of Monkey
- Spirit of Ox
- Spirit of Scorpion
- Spirit of Yekan
- Yekan's Recovery

idea to put most, if not all, of your 20 starting points into wisdom to boost casting ability as early as possible. A little charisma may not hurt, either, if you plan to travel.

If you're a Vah Shir beastlord, keep in mind that many of your early quests require hand fighting and the assistance of other classes. Traveling in parties can help you accomplish the quests. At higher levels, you'll get a defensive boost by earning Beast Tamer armor.

Most players choose to develop an Ogre or Barbarian beastlord in order to take advantage of slightly higher starting attributes, specifically strength. While those race-class combinations work well in combat, the stronger races tend to sacrifice charisma and agility, areas in which the Vah Shir score high.

Ultimately, choosing which race you want for a beastlord character depends on the location you want to start in (Vah Shir are limited to one starting city, for example), which deity you want to follow, and your playing style. Go for high strength and stamina if you enjoy melee combat, or at least pump a lot of starting points into it. Concentrate on high wisdom and charisma if you plan to use a warder and spells for the bulk of your combat.

The Vah Shir Race

The Vah Shir are a noble, catlike people, not vicious and hated like the Iksar, but not nearly as socially adept as the Elven races. Their arrival on Lucilin is largely undocumented, though oral history has that it happened many years ago as a result of the Erudites' experimentation with magical weapons, which culminated in a colossal event called The Shifting. Whether it was through accident or intention, the entire city and most of its inhabitants were flung into space through The Hole. The remaining Vah Shir were herded together and isolated on Kerra Isle, while the transported cats found themselves settling in a cold, inhospitable climate of immeasurable solitude. Today, on the far-off moon of Lucilin, the prosperous city of Shar Vahl houses the cats' proud descendants.

The Vah Shir vary in appearance, ranging from a handsome grey coat with wispy strokes of silver to the classic black-and-orange hide of their Kerran forefathers. This rugged race is friendly to its own kind and tolerant of most outside visitors. Tempers can quickly become inflamed if the situation merits, but most often, conversations are accompanied by a respectful purr or low growl of agreement. They welcome most races, though their fur may stand on end if someone causes a disturbance in their home city.

The Vah Shir take great pride in their past and require all adolescents to complete a ritual of citizenship before apprenticing in any of the town's trades. Although many may exclaim that the rites of passage make citizenship difficult to obtain, the respect that comes with adulthood brings both privilege and opportunity. Few question the loyalty or trustworthiness of fully initiated sisters and brethren.

The Vah Shir are great fighters, possessing both stealth and prowess on the battlefield. Blessed with lightness of paw and some inherent protection from falling, the Vah Shir know little fear. While many choose to follow the path of a warrior, others use their innate skills for more requisite activities. Still, the call of nature resounds deeply in the soul of all Vah Shir. They communicate well with all manner of beasts, and many young Vah Shir pursue beastlord status, developing a deep kinship with tigers and training them as warders. Those few that exhibit an aptitude for alchemy or enchantment adopt the life

of a shaman, while the musically inclined tend to apprentice with local bards and wield their abilities with a finely crafted instrument.

Tips on Playing a Vah Shir

As a young cat, you can hunt from levels 1 to 3 in the crater surrounding the Vah Shir home city of Shar Vahl. To get down there, you will need to find a bridge (north or south), cross it, and climb the wall down. (It's great having Safe Fall—you take less falling damage.) In the crater, you'll find Grimling runts, scorpions, Xakra worms, and hoppers. This should get you to level 4 or so. When you outgrow the crater, head to Shadeweaver's Thicket (south bridge) and hunt more of the same.

Unlike many other societies, the Vah Shir put gaining citizenship right up at the top of their list of things you should do after being born. First things first—find Animist Sadhi and get a note. Then, find Registrar Binderan in the courtyard near the south gate and give him the note. He'll send you off to get a slate and to persuade the tax collector to stamp your paperwork. Another NPC by the name of Mignah gives you a slate—if you ask nicely. Try "I am in need of a personal [illegible] slate."

Take these items to the registrar, and then make the requisite visit to Raja Kerrath in the Royal Palace. Once you return to the registrar, you're properly registered and can begin taking on class-specific quests handed down by the appropriate guildmaster.

Aspiring beastlords should visit the Royal Palace and find Elder Animist Sadhi to get a cloak, and then go to Animist Poran to get started with the handwrap adventures.

New Vah Shir bards should locate the Elder Hymnist Hortitosh in the bards' guild (on top of the Royal Palace). Bring him proof of your citizenship to get the claw quest.

Shaman Vah Shir should seek Fehril, near Animist Sadhi in the Royal Palace. She sends you on a cloak quest.

Rogue Vah Shir must find Rakutah to get their first real quest. A rogue trainer is also hidden on an upper floor near the city gates. Warrior Vah Shir must seek out High Armsman Trukhenah for guidance.

Finally, if you're looking for more Shar Vahl quests, see Dronsam Rungbi (alchemy quest), Master Barkhem (shield quest), Taruun Relom (wage quest), or Arms Historian Qua (Wolf Bane weapon quest).

The name of the game for the Vah Shir is cooperation. One important fact you'll learn early on is that the Vah Shir rely heavily on each other's skills. You'll need to master the skills of your own profession and in turn, rely on others' career skills. Each class has items that can be crafted or gained only through mastery, and it won't take long to figure out that you need to work with other Vah Shir to complete many of the game's quests.

The Vah Shir are naturally gifted with Sneak and Safe Fall. The city of Shar Vahl isn't particularly mountainous or dangerous, but these skills will prove useful when you venture away from your home den. While these skills are effective for warriors, they also help those Vah Shir with, well, less stringent morals. Watch your pockets!

Hierarchy is another integral part of the Vah Shir society, which is built upon honor, loyalty, [illegible] and elders. The Raja of the Vah Shir rules, and quite a regal spectacle. You can find him in the Royal Palace, in the northern part of the city, flanked by two bodyguards.

The warder is the beastlord's equivalent of a pet, only this pet is good for life past level 9 and isn't afraid to move into new zones with you. Basically, your pet is about evenly matched with [illegible] experience.

That said, pay special attention to all of the "Spirit of" spells you get at certain levels. These pet-buffing spells have several purposes. They can temporarily raise the level of your warder and can even make it self-sufficient in battle against things that normally con blue against you. Other spirit spells give your warder additional damage potential, and still others heal your pet. Finally, at higher levels, warders employ additional attack types, including [illegible] and kick.

Vah Shir Starting Statistics

Starting City: Shar Vahl
Racial Tensions: None
Special Abilities: Sneak, Safe Fall

	STR	STA	AGI	DEX	WIS	INT	CHA	Bonus AP
Beastlord	90	85	95	70	80	65	70	+20
Bard	95	75	90	80	70	65	75	+25
Rogue	90	75	100	80	70	65	65	+30
Shaman	90	80	90	70	80	65	70	+30
Warrior	100	85	95	70	70	65	65	+25

Rites of Passage for a Young Vah Shir

By Moonshadow Litherial for Lunemew Gernawl

The life of a young Vah Shir is an interesting progression. When you determine which path you wish to follow—warrior, rogue, bard, shaman, or the new beastlord—your guild master will first send you off to become an official citizen.

After citizenship is granted, guildmasters provide new and increasingly challenging tasks for their young trainees. You'll be sent first around the city, and then later around adjoining zones to learn more about your surroundings, all the while improving your armor and weapons. As you progress in level, the guildmasters entrust you with more challenging tasks. Between tasks, however, there's plenty of time for you to adventure on your own terms, tussle in the arena with your friends or littermates, and even time to meet up with one of the king's dancers in the Merchant's Quarter Celebration House.

In keeping with Vah Shir social norms, later tasks require you to work closely with some of the other classes to complete your tasks. Items you need to complete your work are available only from Vah Shir who study other professions. These quests illustrate the deep-rooted traditions of cooperation and information sharing that have sustained the Vah Shir society over the years and preserved their strong presence on the harsh surface of Luclin.

The path you have chosen will lead you through many lands and help to forge many long-lasting friendships. When your journey is finished, the strength in your heart will serve as a light for generations to come.

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon

Destroy the enemy and then disappear into the mist like ghosts By Raphael Liberatore

Ghost Recon is all about infantry tactics. Use them wisely, and your team will dispatch enemy soldiers like professionals. Some tactics are useful all the time, while others work only in specific situations. The goal is to take each mission as it comes and apply the principles learned from this primer—in spades. Use the quick-save feature whenever you're having difficulty. Better to live to fight another day.

Infantry Fireteam Tactics

Since many of the missions offer limited visibility, the Threat indicator, located at the center below your crosshairs, is your best friend. Rely on it when you can't find the enemy or to avoid an ambush. When the center lights red, immediately crouch and scan the area. If you don't see the enemy, then it's probably a good idea to back away slowly and stay alert. Usually, the Threat indicator will light up as you approach the enemy and indicate the direction in which they are located. Only when you're close by does the center glow red.

Soldier stats can be a bit perplexing, so it's a good idea to keep the same soldiers throughout most of the game. The most important stat of all is stealth. The higher it is, the closer you can move toward the enemy without them spotting you.

Leadership is another interesting stat, worthy of your time. The soldier with the most leadership points is considered the team's leader. For every team leader's leadership point, everyone's stats go up one-third of a point. So for every three leadership points, one full skill point is added to everyone's stat. Don't waste leadership points on anyone other than the leader, because *Ghost Recon*'s bonus system does not combine bonuses with high leadership skills of other soldiers. Award a maximum of six leadership points because they are wasted afterwards. Try to focus points on stealth and weapons skills. Don't worry too much about filling up the endurance skill; it won't create any bonus packs or internal med-kits. This is a one shot-one kill game, and healing doesn't work.

Move, Shoot, Communicate

Avoid standing at all costs: You'll provide an easy target for the enemy to shoot at. Never run and shoot at mid-to-long range targets. Your accuracy will quickly diminish because of recoil and lack of weapon stability. Try a more cautious approach by crouching and firing, and then shuffling left or right after a few shots. Another tactic: Lay prone, fire, and then move a few feet to a new position and fire again. Always assume you're being targeted during a firefight, so never remain stationary for more than five seconds. Moving cautiously in a crouch will improve your chances of surviving. Use cover whenever possible; the enemy has a tough time observing where your shots are coming from, which makes you harder to hit.

FIGURE 1: Stone Bell Mini-Map. Concentrate your firepower underneath the bridge, marked "1" here.

When available, use weapons with smaller muzzle-flash footprints, like the MP5 SD or any of the silenced pistols. Many of the heavier caliber weapons are easier to spot due to increased muzzle flash. Only the sniper, firing from long range, can get away with shooting heavier weapons without being too much of a target. High stealth skill and silenced weapons make for a deadly soldier. Keep your weapons on semiauto and fire only two to three shots at each target. Fire machine guns like the SAW in controlled bursts. Grenades and HE rounds from the OWC and M203 are useful when targeting large groups of enemy soldiers or those hunkered inside buildings with openings (like windows).

Keep a constant watch on the minimap. Not only can you command your fireteam's rules of engagement (RoE) and waypoints from here, you can also study the terrain well. It's also good for spotting and reacting to enemy positions. Know the various RoE commands and their meaning. *Assault* (the default) has your soldiers shooting on sight. *Suppress* has your soldiers reacting to nearby threats, but their accuracy is not as effective. *Recon* is useful for getting your soldiers into position when you want to avoid detection, but if they're getting shot at, they will return fire.

Mission Walkthroughs

Mission 3: Stone Bell

SITREP: Destroy the northeast and southwest patrols. Prevent the enemy from breaching the NATO HQ, and allow no NATO casualties.

OPERATIVES. You'll need at least one demolitions expert for this mission since your team will face enemy tanks. Take a sniper and at least one support soldier. Use riflemen to fill out the rest of the teams. Make sure you take along one soldier with high leadership points. Your demolitions expert should carry a M136 antitank rocket launcher. Outfit the sniper with an M24. Everyone else, scrap the submachine guns and go for M16s, M203s, or another higher-velocity bullet launcher.

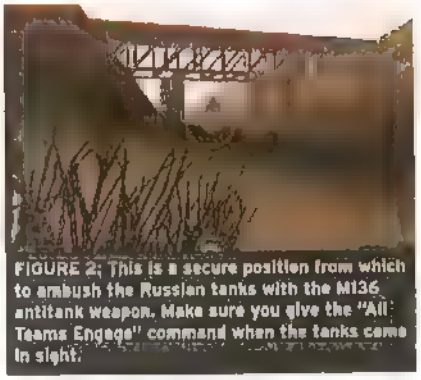


FIGURE 2: This is a secure position from which to ambush the Russian tanks with the M136 antitank weapon. Make sure you give the "All Teams Engage" command when the tanks come in sight.

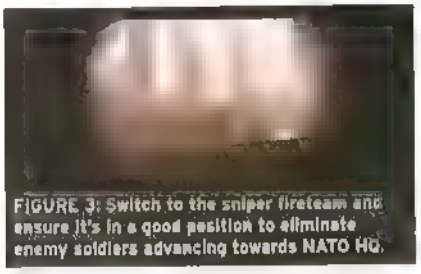


FIGURE 3: Switch to the sniper fireteam and ensure it's in a good position to eliminate enemy soldiers advancing towards NATO HQ.

WARNING ORDER. Your team inserts into the southern part of the map. Move your demolition team toward the bushes beside the cliff to the west of your insertion point, and wait for enemy tanks to roll into their kill zone. Keep them in suppress mode and prone till you hear the tanks rolling in—that's when you want to take control of them. Once the demo team is in position, move the rest of your fireteams to the northeast, and carefully survey the landscape along the way looking for patrolling enemy soldiers. Circumnavigate your team around the building to the hills to the northeast and place them in prone positions. There's a patrol moving around up there near the tracks, so stay alert. Always keep an eye on your team's Threat indicators for patrols. Be cautious and look for enemies along the ridgeline. Once you take out the four or so soldiers milling about there, you've completed the first objective. Move them back along the crest of the hills to the east of the road near the NATO HQ building and lay them prone, facing toward the bridge to the north, ready for the oncoming assault.

Next, stealthily move the sniper fireteam in a prone position to a spot near the tree west of the NATO HQ building, while watching the road

ahead under the bridge. Keep your sniper team's firing arcs facing slightly west, as there's a good chance the northwest enemy patrol will move to the south and try to flank the team there. Place the team behind some cover so they're not easy targets, but make sure the sniper has a wide field of view down the road when the tanks come rolling in because both tanks will have accompanying infantry support.

There are a couple of soldiers milling around the train tracks to the northwest; if you're lucky, they'll try to flank your now-waiting teams.

You'll hear the tanks coming, so once the tanks roll in, immediately put your teams on engage mode and take out the enemy. Take the tanks out quickly with your demolitions team, and then shift to the sniper and concentrate on the enemy infantry heading down the road, looking for targets. Once the tanks and supporting enemy infantry are taken out, you've completed that objective. If you haven't done so already, take your rifle team and look for a couple of enemy soldiers straggling near the northwest portion of the map. When you've taken them out, the mission is complete. **(FIGURES 1, 2, AND 3)**

Mission 8: Zebra Straw

SITREP: Secure the village and then destroy eastern and western artillery batteries while protecting allied tanks.

OPERATIVES: The mission starts off with a new demolitions specialist, but because you'll want to use your original tank busters, you won't need him unless they've been killed off during a previous operation. Make sure you outfit them with M136 antitank weapons. Take a sniper and at least one support soldier. The SAW will come in handy—there are plenty of enemies—and it's a good weapon choice for mowing down waves of soldiers. Use riflemen to fill out the rest of the teams, but try to create a team with high stealth points and outfit it with CQB specialist Henry Ramirez (with his MP5)—there are a couple of instances during combat when stealth may play a factor near the church. Make sure you take along one soldier with high leadership points.

WARNING ORDER: This mission is tough because combat starts as soon as your team is inserted. Move your three teams into the rubble and set them to either crouched or prone positions and prepare for an immediate attack. Toward the end of the battle, set your teams into engage mode to mop up the stragglers. After the firefight, move your teams cautiously to the northwest through a ruined wall and then continue to the northwest, keeping an eye out for roving enemies. Check the minimap occasionally to get a bearing on your position. Keep looking for a Russian tank that will soon erupt in flames from an allied attack. Move to the northwest and look for a war-ravaged church. Take out the enemy milling around the church and the street along the other side. Have your sniper look for targets while sending your rifle team across the street to eliminate enemy soldiers hiding out. Once they're killed, you have reached your first objective and secured the village.

At this point, a friendly tank will move in from the west supported by friendly soldiers. Don't mistake them for the enemy. If you're unsure, check the minimap; green means friendlies. Cautiously head north, toward the first Russian artillery piece, but make sure you survey the landscape for roving enemy patrols. Watch for soldiers coming over ridgelines—they make juicy targets. Once the area around the artillery has been cleared, have your demolitions expert take the artillery out with a shot from the M136.

Now it's time to head southwest for the final artillery objective. There will be plenty of Russians guarding the area, so remain vigilant and move cautiously. Make sure you kill the enemy along the hill before the artillery position, or they will disappear around it and, later, flank your teams. After clearing the area of enemy soldiers, have your demo expert fire an M136 rocket at the artillery. Mission completed. **(FIGURES 4, 5, AND 6)**

Mission 9: Blue Storm

SITREP: Clear the northern, eastern, and western islands and then capture the Russian officer.

OPERATIVES: This mission requires a standard mix of riflemen, support, and one sniper. Bring along a demolitions expert in order to gain necessary skill points for later missions. Equip one team with silenced weapons and the CQB specialist Henry Ramirez (if you unlocked him), but make sure the others are carrying the standard arsenal of OICW, M16s, M203s, M249 SAWs, or M4s. Make sure the sniper brings along his M24. It's a good idea to stick with soldiers you pick for this mission, using them for the rest of the game, since skill points do matter in the later missions.

WARNING ORDER: In this mission, rain and overcast cloud your vision, so visibility will become a factor in making long-range shots, except for the sniper thanks to his zooming capability. Start north from your insertion point, past the destroyed building, and move cautiously until you are in sight of the eastern island. Position your soldiers in supporting firing arcs aimed at the island; make sure everyone lies prone. Use your sniper to sneak close to the bunker and take out the enemy sniper hiding there. When the bunker soldiers are killed, the island is alerted to your presence. Issue the engage command as the enemy tries to launch an assault on your teams' positions. Head west and look for the Russian officer near the center of the map (labeled "1"). Get as close to him as possible but don't shoot, even though your Threat Indicator shows red. If you kill him, you'll have to restart the mission. He may run, so make sure your team is standing in position to move fast enough to stop him. He's captured when you get close enough to him. If you dally too long before capturing him, he'll pull a gun and you'll have to shoot him dead, dooming your mission.

Now move to the northern island. Be cautious, as there's a heavily camouflaged sniper roaming around—keep your sniper on full alert, ready to take him out. There are fewer Russians on this island than on the eastern one. After you've

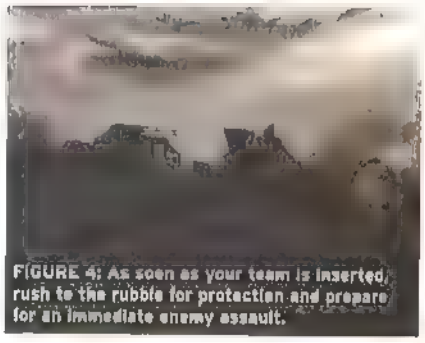


FIGURE 4: As soon as your team is inserted, rush to the rubble for protection and prepare for an immediate enemy assault.

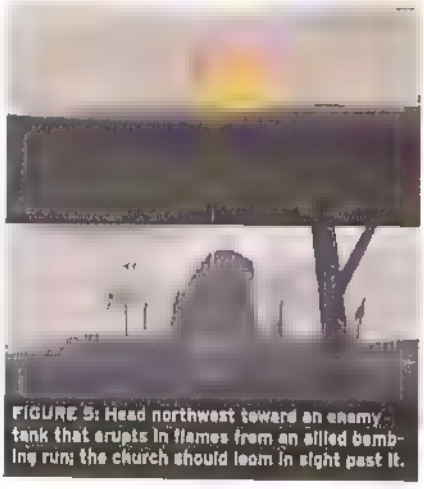


FIGURE 5: Head northwest toward an enemy tank that erupts in flames from an allied bombing run; the church should loom in sight past it.

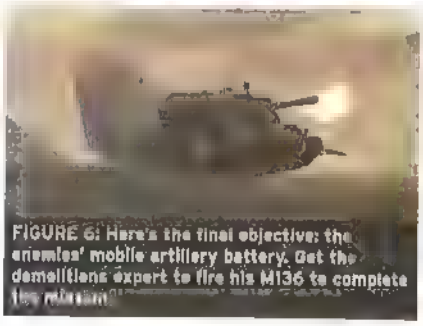


FIGURE 6: Here's the final objective: the enemies' mobile artillery battery. Get the demolitions expert to fire his M136 to complete the mission.

cleared the northern island, it's time to move cautiously southwest to the western island. Here stands a Russian camp with plenty of targets. First eliminate the soldiers patrolling the swamp nearby, before bearing down on the camp. Position your teams from three sides and engage any targets of opportunity. Use the sniper as your primary assaulter. When you've cleared the island, you've secured the objective and the mission ends. **(FIGURES 7 AND 8)**

Mission 10: Fever Claw

SITREP: Secure University Square, the Presidential Palace, and Cathedral Square, without taking any friendly tank casualties.

OPERATIVES: This mission is best played with one fireteam consisting of three demolitions experts. Outfit the other teams with the usual mix of soldiers so they can earn skill points, though these soldiers aren't necessary to the mission—you'll be concentrating on the fireteam of demolitions experts. Outfit them

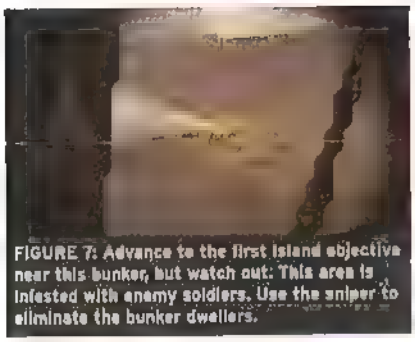


FIGURE 7: Advance to the first island objective near this bunker, but watch out: This area is infested with enemy soldiers. Use the sniper to eliminate the bunker dwellers.

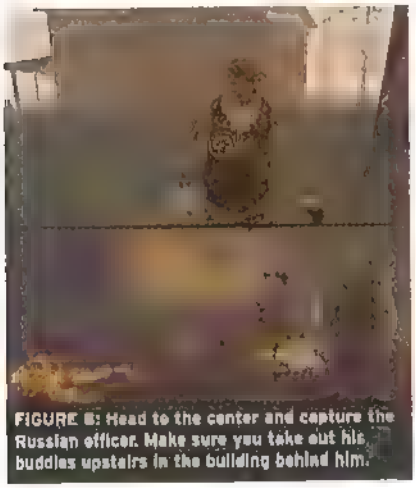


FIGURE 8: Head to the center and capture the Russian officer. Make sure you take out his buddies upstairs in the building behind him.

all with M136 antitank rocket launchers.

WARNING ORDER. This mission is tough because you have to move fast in order to take out nine enemy tanks. But you have a choice of tactics: One is to escort the column of friendly tanks, protecting them from the countless enemy soldiers toting antitank weapons, and hope they take out the enemy tanks. Another tactic is to be the aggressor and eliminate tanks with one fireteam consisting of three demolition experts. Chances are, the second option will ensure the friendly tank survival. The problem here lies in how many rockets you have to work with—nine rockets for nine tanks. Miss one, and you're back to tactic one: relying on your friendly tanks to get the job done. So be accurate with your shots.

Start the mission by escorting the tank column on the northern side of the road with your demo fireteam. Be cautious, and take out any enemies lurking ahead. When you reach the destroyed vehicle in the middle of the road, be prepared to take out the Russian tank waiting around the corner on the other side of the building with your M136. When you've eliminated it, quickly switch to your primary weapon, and kill soldiers trying to take out your tanks. Then move ahead of your column and cross the southern side of the road.

Keep moving while searching for Russians until you reach a huge rubble pile. Move cautiously and kill any Russians waiting to ambush your column. Turn northeast and destroy the two enemy tanks waiting in the distance. Distance is a factor here, so you have to be accurate. If you try to get closer, tanks could destroy your team. Move forward and eliminate soldiers before your column arrives. University Square is now secured. But don't wait for the friendly tank column to catch up. Switch to another demo expert and drive on, heading north while keeping an eye peeled for enemies on the eastern side of the road.

Check your map and get a bearing before proceeding to Presidential Palace to the west. A nasty patrol of Russian soldiers lies in wait, so move cautiously and shoot them dead before you turn south. Again, check your mini-map if you're not sure about your location. A tank waits to the south, so switch weapons and take it out. Then switch back to your primary weapon and search for soldiers waiting to ambush your team.

Move cautiously south along the eastern side of the road until your team reaches a broken-down truck. Move slowly past it, looking down the street to the west where another tank waits. Switch weapons and do the deed. Stay cautious, for the Presidential Palace area is still crawling with soldiers. Move across the street to the palace and look for Russians lingering on the rubble ramp or inside the building. You may have to enter the building to take them out. Check your Threat Indicator for possible locations. The area will be secured only after all Russians in the area are killed. Secure the Presidential Palace by eliminating all threats.

Time to get another head start and move west. Remember to change your POV demolitions expert for the next tank-busting moment. It may be a good time to bring in another fireteam from the insertion point, because the corridors ahead are filled with plenty of enemy soldiers. Check your minimap and order them to the crossroads at the far west of the map. Head west and link up with them at the farthest juncture. Eliminate the two or three Russians patrolling the far western road. Have your other fireteam move up the street and stop around the northeast corner looking for targets of opportunity. Now follow them and move till your teams hit the eastern road. Move cautiously searching for targets. When you see some grass, find the Russians trying to get a bead on your fireteams. Order your riflemen forward in an assault RoE and follow them, hugging the eastern side of the grassy area. After everyone has been eliminated, head north and east for the final showdown at Cathedral Square.

Three tanks await your teams at the end of the street. Act quickly to take them out, while ordering your other team to suppress enemy soldiers. After you've eliminated the three tanks, head into the square in engage mode and kill all Russian soldiers.

The final tank waits south, so change your POV demolitionist to the one with a remaining rocket, and bust it. If for some reason you are lacking a rocket, then wait for your friendly tanks to arrive. They should have no problem in taking out this last tank as long as you have cleared the square of enemy soldiers. When they have destroyed the final tank, Cathedral Square is yours and the mission ends.
(FIGURES 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13)

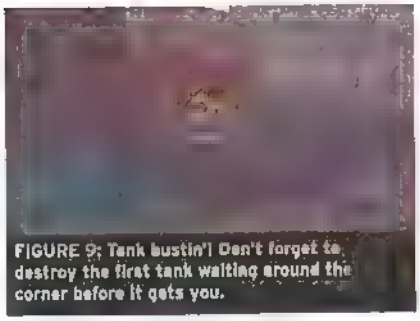


FIGURE 9: Tank bustin'! Don't forget to destroy the first tank waiting around the corner before it gets you.

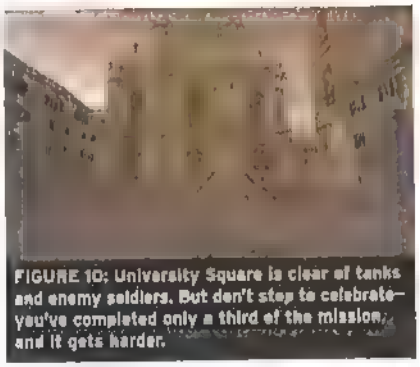


FIGURE 10: University Square is clear of tanks and enemy soldiers. But don't stop to celebrate—you've completed only a third of the mission, and it gets harder.

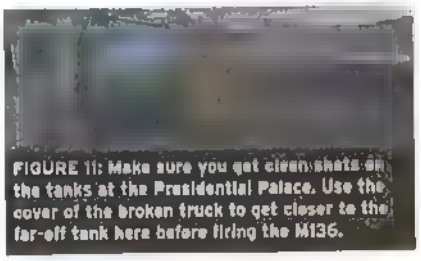


FIGURE 11: Make sure you get clean shots on the tanks at the Presidential Palace. Use the cover of the broken truck to get closer to the far-off tank here before firing the M136.

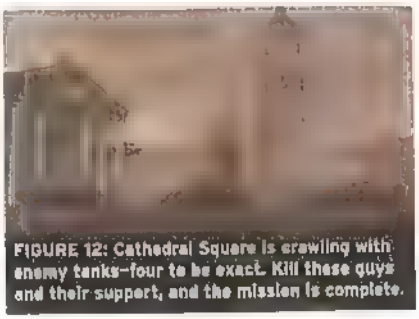


FIGURE 12: Cathedral Square is crawling with enemy tanks—four to be exact. Kill these guys and their support, and the mission is complete.

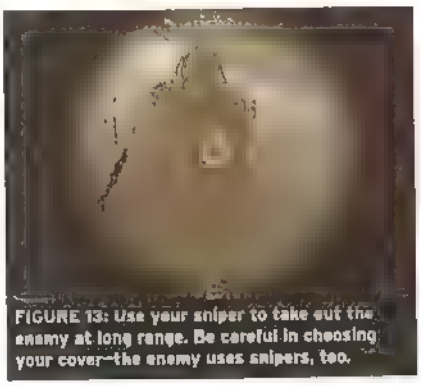
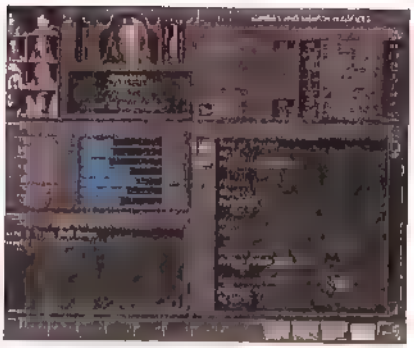
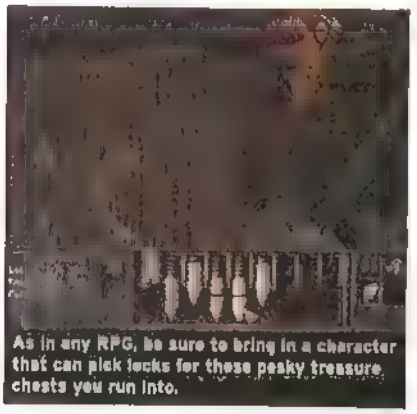


FIGURE 13: Use your sniper to take out the enemy at long range. Be careful in choosing your cover—the enemy uses snipers, too.

See this bard? See that little lyre in his inventory (lower left)? Features like that make him indispensible for a successful *Wizardry 8* party.





As in any RPG, be sure to bring in a character that can pick locks for these pesky treasure chests you run into.

Wizardry 8

Helping newbies plan the best party of all

By Arcadian Del Sol

Wizardry 8 is a big game, which is great; I love big games. However, nothing can spoil a great role-playing game better than bad party design. Remember those college afternoons playing *Dungeons & Dragons* while skipping Advanced Trig? Remember how irritating it was when your party of four players turned out to be three rangers and a thief every single time you played? Nobody wanted to be the cleric, and let's be honest here: To play a mage with any measure of competence often required a minor in business accounting and a calculator, in a word: unfun. Granted, it is a word that doesn't exist, but you get the idea. While a human Dungeon Master could easily accommodate a party with absolutely no ability to heal and cure itself, a computer will simply flicker at you in the dark while you reload your save game for the eleventy hundredth time. Unfortunately, by the time you realize you've earned a D- in Party Creation 101, you've already wasted an entire semester work ng your way into the game. Sometimes, the difference between a great game campa gn and a two-month tour of frustration can be as simple as building the right party of adventurers. While the *Wizardry 8* manua contains everything you need to create an effective squad of heroes, one glimpse at it and you realize that you're going to have to make some hard choices. With so many races and classes and skills available, you simply won't be able to have everything you want.

Uh, I Like Her Personality

After creating clever names for your characters, you have to give them appropriate personality types. While this may seem unimportant at first, the personality of your characters can often significantly affect how other characters react to your presence. If you make a party of surly oners, you shouldn't expect a great deal of assistance from the loca barmaid. If you happen to be a surly toner, and simply must have one in your party, try to balance the field by adding a cheeky intellectual or a kindly bard. While your party won't live or die by the personal ty choices you make, you can certainly make things easier on yourself by putting in a little balance and variety. It'll be good practice for the next round of cho ces you'll have to make.

No decision you make in *Wizardry 8* will be more important than the one about race and class combinations for your characters. Most games will differentiate between races and classes by mak ng some stronger and others smarter. *Wizardry 8* steps into the rea m of political incorrectness by insisting that some races simply don't make good wizards, and other races make better musicians.

A.I kidd ng aside, the game does take traditional fantasy stereotypes and give them some validation. It is generally accepted that Elves are athe and dexterous, making excellent archers and rangers. It is also generally accepted that Dwarves are not the smartest c an you'll find, but are excellent metalworkers and very strong. While most games simply give a nod to these standard stereotypes, *Wizardry 8* offers bonus attribute points for your use if you create characters that fall within these parameters. For example, let's say your party is in bad need of a talented bard (trust me, it will be). If your musician is a Halfling, you'll get a whopp ng 40 additional points to apply to his skills. But if your bard is a Lizardman, you'll actually *lose* five points from those previously available to you.

By paying close attention to the relat onship between race and class, you can g ve your party a tremendous boost before you even begin playing the game. Unless, of course, you manage to spend attribute points unwisely. Attributes are the familiar ones such as strength, dexterity, and intelligence, with values ranging from 0 to 100. Should any of these attributes reach the maximum value, your character is rewarded with a special ability or skill that can often make the difference between victory and reloading.

Play On, Lute Friend, Play On!

With only six slots available for player-created characters and two slots for hired NPCs, you're not going to be able to field every class, race, or set of ski ls. The standard rules apply here: You'll need powerful attack magic and a talented healer. In addition to the established norms for fantasy part es, I would recommend

Run up to this gazebo in the beginning to score some neat feet for your wimpy adventurers.

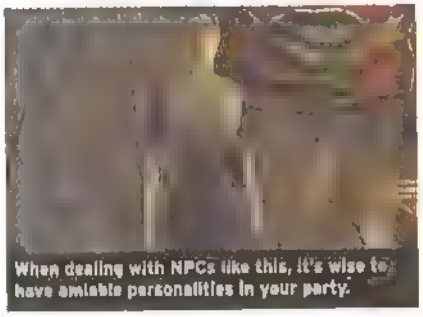
In combat, whether you're fighting one guy or a bunch, put your mages in the center, not the rear.

that you have at least one bard. In most RPGs, a bard is simply a character that wastes space better spent on a cleric. In *Wizardry 8*, the bard is essential. There are countless (well, at least 25) magical instruments that can be used only by bards, and if you don't have one, you will ultimately come to a point at which you'll wish you did. Said instruments can cast the most powerful spells in the game, without fizzling or backfiring. That should be enough of a reason to consider dropping a character to make a bard. In fact, with two bards (one recruitable NPC and one I created), I could use one for buffing my fellows and the other for making the enemy nuts or sleepy, stunned or frozen. That said, *Wizardry 8* allows you to modify your party membership after the fact (if you went ahead and made a party sans bard), but if you replace your redundant archer with a level-1 bard, all the abilities, skills, and experiences earned by the archer will be lost. You'll have to weigh the risks, but the option is there.

After carefully crafting your party, you're ready for adventure. After a brief introduction, you'll be deposited in a shallow lagoon where you've just washed ashore amid the wreckage of a doomed vessel. A moment later, you're already in your first battle with a small family of sand crabs. It sounds simple, but your party stands a good chance of becoming crab food if you're not careful. The rule of thumb for party formation, from the moment the very first 20-sided die ever rolled a 1, has been to keep the mages in the back. But be careful: In *Wizardry 8*, there is no "back" to your party. If you don't keep your mages in the center, they're not going to be casting spells for very long. Think twice about whom you do put on the rear flank—for the most part, they'll be sitting and watching the combat taking place near the forward flanks. The most effective method of ensuring that every member of your party is able to participate in combat is to train and equip everyone with some form of ballistic weaponry. Each character is able to hold both a primary and secondary weapon, so you won't sacrifice any inventory storage in order to accomplish this.

Realistically, you shouldn't have any problem dispatching the little sand crabs. You'll want to explore the area around the lagoon carefully before moving on. If you wade across the shallows, you'll find a footpath winding up a narrow ledge. A few more crabs will try to prevent you from moving farther along the path, but if you are persistent, there's a worthy reward at the top. Inside a little observatory, you'll find a few magical items perfect for the level-1 party that has nothing.

After this find, you're ready to return to the beach and brave the dangers lurking within the catacomb entrance in the rock face. A few turns and bends into the tunnels, and you will have become quite familiar with combat and possibly even save-game restoration. You'll notice that with every battle or other significant use of skills, characters are awarded increases according to their actions. It will quickly become obvious how important it is to make sure your bard actually uses his musicianship skill and your archer uses his archery skill. These one-point gains might seem small, but they add up over time. It is important to pick one or two primary job roles for each character and stick to them to maximize the abilities and talents of your party.


When dealing with NPCs like this, it's wise to have amiable personalities in your party.

Wizardry 8 is a big game, and at times it can be difficult and frustrating. But if you take the extra time to carefully plan your party, you will find yourself on the winning side of a conflict more often than not. You might even become strong enough to thwart the Dark Savant once and for all. I personally would appreciate it. That guy has been up to no good for long enough already.

PARTY ON

Here's a quick-and-dirty plan that I used with great success. My only regret was not having a samurai, as I found some very nice armor early on that was entirely useless to me. Otherwise, you can do well with this party.

- Human rogue
- Dracon fighter
- Faerie mage
- Fellow bard
- Halfling gadgeteer
- Dwarf priest

Head-on passes are inadvisable—the bad guy gets a shot at you, and you could collide.

IL-2 Sturmovik

Master air combat without blowing yourself up

By Denny Atkin

With its impressive AI and realistic flight models, *IL-2 Sturmovik* can prove challenging even for experienced PC pilots. The planes are so easy to fly (once you're in the air, at least) that even beginners can jump in and start shooting. But the bad guys fly with such precision that the novice combat technique of turning until an enemy comes into your sights will win you only a quick death.

AI aircraft use very realistic techniques in *IL-2*—except for their tenacity in continuing to fight despite suffering heavy damage. The realism is good preparation for multiplayer play and real-life attack and evasion techniques, and you don't have to fudge for differences in odd AI behaviors. Also, it means you can put your plane on autopilot and jump between external views, watching how the AI handles attacks. This is a good technique for learning proper approaches for ground attacks, but you'll want to be more aggressive than the AI in turning air-to-air situations to your advantage.

Defense: Altitude Is Life

While this sim's namesake plane is a ground-attack aircraft, your first priority should be mastering air combat skills. Perfecting your ground attacks ensures success, perfecting your air combat skills ensures survival. Even if you're flying an IL-2, air-to-air skills can keep you alive to reach the target, and might even net you a bonus Focke-Wulf kill on the way home.

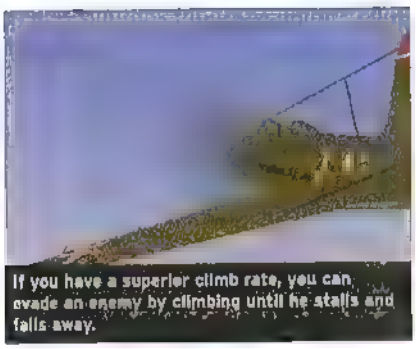
While offensive maneuvers are covered in the manual, defense is key as well, especially if you're flying an attack aircraft. The key to success in air combat is getting your opponent into the realm where your airplane handles best. If you're flying a Messerschmitt-109, you don't want to get into a turning battle with the nimble I-16. If you're in the more maneuverable plane, then you want to try to draw your opponent into a slow, turning fight where you can gain the advantage.

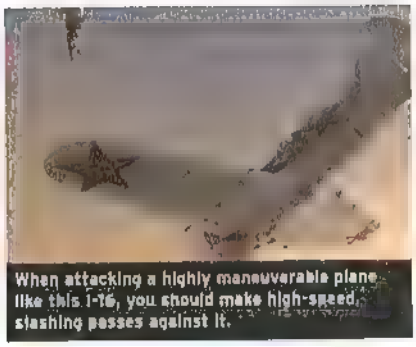
When you spot an enemy fighter, try to get an altitude advantage. The combination of altitude and airspeed is referred to as "energy." The pilot with the highest level of energy controls the fight. Thus, the best place to be when engaging a fighter is above them, not because you might have a shot from that angle, but because altitude can be converted to air speed. If you find yourself in trouble and you have the energy advantage, you can dive or climb away, extend the distance between you and the enemy's guns, and re-engage when you're no longer in danger.

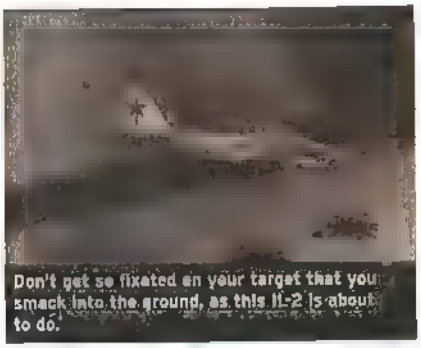
If the enemy gets the jump on you (that is, if you start seeing tracer bullets flying by your window), break immediately. If he's shooting, he's in good position to take you out. Break to the left or right to ruin his shot, and continue the turn for two or three seconds after the tracers stop. Then straighten out and fly away at full throttle while you regain energy.

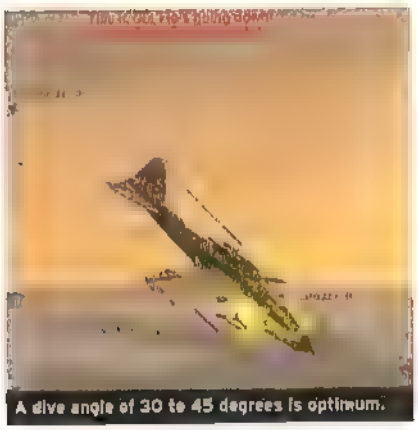
If you have the energy advantage but you don't have the altitude to dive away, you can attempt to climb away from the pursuing enemy. Keep climbing until you're close to a stall. Because he didn't start with as much speed as you, he'll either break off the pursuit, or he'll stall out and fall away before you do.

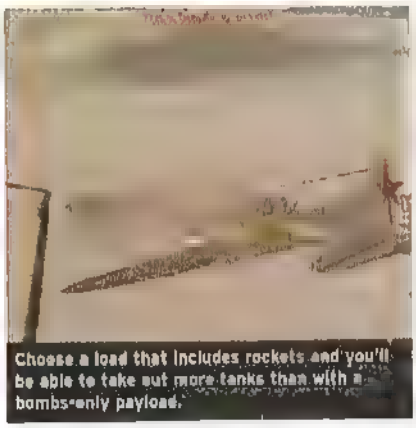
EXTENDING THE ACTION

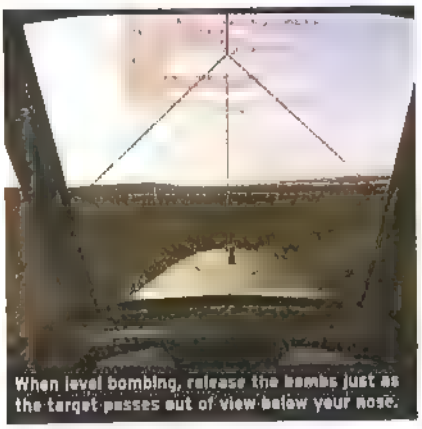

If you have a superior climb rate, you can evade an enemy by climbing until he stalls and falls away.


When attacking a highly maneuverable plane like this I-16, you should make high-speed, slashing passes against it.


Don't get so fixated on your target that you smack into the ground, as this Il-2 is about to do.


A dive angle of 30 to 45 degrees is optimum.


Choose a load that includes rockets and you'll be able to take out more tanks than with a bombs-only payload.


When level bombing, release the bombs just as the target passes out of view below your nose.

You'll see AI fighters using this evasion technique if you try to jump them.

But what if you don't have the energy advantage, and the enemy plane has enough of an advantage that break-and-run isn't going to work? If you're in the more maneuverable aircraft, your goal is to bring the enemy plane on your turf. Immediately break and start turning. Although may not seem the smart thing to do, most AI and many human opponents will start turning with you, bleeding off their energy advantage. As he pulls tighter trying to get a bead on you, he loses his energy advantage, and with your superior maneuverability you should be able to eventually bring your nose around and get the kill.

If your plane is equally matched or inferior in maneuverability, it's time for desperate measures. Don't get pulled into a turning fight—you'll be toast soon enough. Head down to the deck, hug the ground, and try for a maneuver kill, seeing if you can make the enemy smack into a hill or tree. If there are friendly fighters or antiaircraft emplacements around, head in their direction and drag your pursuer into hostile fire. If you're flying an IL-2 with a tail gunner, try to get into a position where the guy in back can get a shot. You can even hit the C key and jump into the back seat yourself, but the computer autopilot doesn't do a very good job of setting you up for a shot.

Offense: Framing the Shot

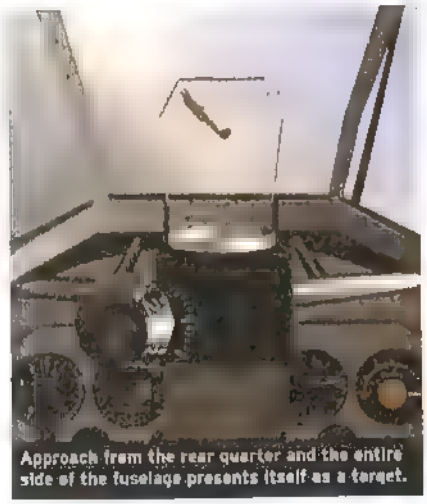
You've gotten the offense. The enemy bomber enters your sights, you fire, and...nothing. Swinging back around for another pass, you get ready to open fire—and the enemy plane's tail gunner blows your left wing off.

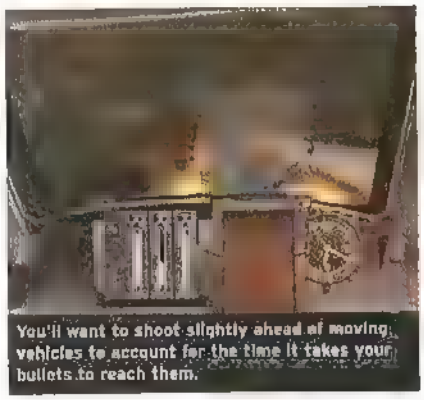
The key is to approach your target from an angle that lets you get a good shot, without leaving yourself vulnerable to enemy fire. Ideally, you want to approach from the rear quarter of your target—about 30 to 45 degrees off their line of flight. This will give you a nice, wide target to shoot at (the entire side of the plane's fuselage), rather than the hard-to-hit inverted-T you see approaching directly from the rear. Of course, the caveat here is that when attacking bombers, coming in from this angle can open you up to defensive fire from side gunners and turrets. Weave a bit as you approach, and keep in mind the placement of the defensive guns of the plane you're attacking and try to come in below or behind their firing arcs.

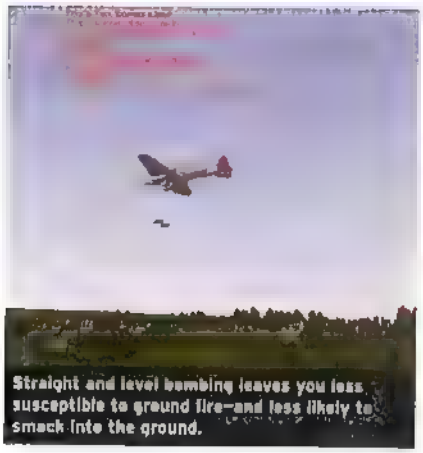
The plane you're shooting at is moving, and you're firing bullets, not lasers. You'll need to use deflection shooting when firing at a plane that's crossing your path. That is, don't point your plane's nose directly at the enemy plane, but rather at the spot where the enemy plane will be by the time your bullets hit it.

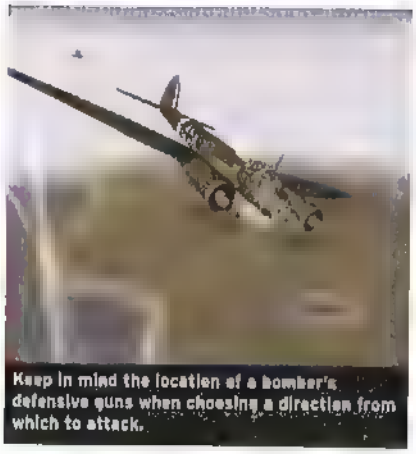
When you're attacking a fighter, getting on its tail and hanging there is a perfectly valid strategy. Creep up behind a bomber though, and you present an inviting target for its gunners. Better to make quick passes from the front or sides. It'll take you longer to shoot the plane down, but you're more likely to survive the encounter.

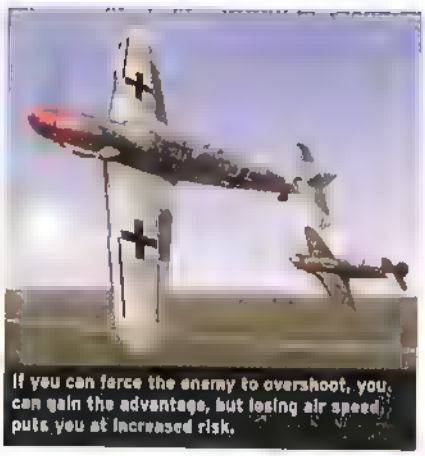
The same applies when attacking a plane with a good turn radius. Don't try to make a one-shot kill or he'll pull you into a turning fight and eventually gain the advantage. Instead, make


Approach from the rear quarter and the entire side of the fuselage presents itself as a target.


You'll want to shoot slightly ahead of moving vehicles to account for the time it takes your bullets to reach them.


Straight and level bombing leaves you less susceptible to ground fire—and less likely to smack into the ground.


Keep in mind the location of a bomber's defensive guns when choosing a direction from which to attack.


If you can force the enemy to overshoot, you can gain the advantage, but losing air speed puts you at increased risk.

multiple passes on him, wearing him down as you go and maintaining control of the fight. If he dives away from you, don't follow. Wait for him to bottom out, and then attack from above.

Avoid head-on attacks against other fighters. Your speed is so great, it's very hard to hit the enemy, and you're putting yourself right in his sights. The odds are just as good he'll get a kill shot at you as you will at him, there's also a great risk of collision.

Many of the planes in this sim can take a lot of damage from machine guns before coming apart. Cannons are much more effective, but they generally have a slower firing rate and less ammo. Once you feel like you're lined up and close enough for a shot, fire your machine guns first and use the machine guns to see if you're lined up for a shot. Once you see your bullets hitting, kick in the cannons. Although the cannon fire doesn't have the same trajectory as machine gun fire, if you're as close to the target as you should be, it shouldn't matter.

Ground: 1, Sturmovik: 0

Unlike many flight sims, *Sturmovik* doesn't exaggerate the sizes of ground targets to make them easier to spot from the air. Hitting ground targets can be a real challenge, especially if they're on the move. The deflection shooting technique discussed earlier applies here as well. If you're firing at a tank that's barreling across the battlefield, fire at the place you think the tank will be when your ammo hits.

In ground-attack missions, many pilots inadvertently introduce kamikaze techniques to the Russian air force. It's very easy to get fixated on the target and pull up too late or even fly straight into the target. This often happens when you make too steep a dive at the target. In the IL-2, diving attacks should be made at about a 45-degree angle, no steeper. Put your plane on autopilot and watch the other planes in your flight attack from the external view to get a good feel for the proper dive angle.

When bombing vehicles, you can avoid a risky dive by flying a low, straight approach. The key here is to set your bombs to go off after a short delay, so they don't explode directly below you and damage your plane. During the mission briefing, go to the arming screen and set the bomb delay to three seconds. Then, fly straight and level toward your target at low altitude and release the bombs as soon as the target passes out of sight under your nose. This has the added benefit of keeping you at a low altitude, making you less vulnerable to AA fire.

Whenever possible, choose a weapons load that includes rockets. You can take out more targets with rockets than with most bomb loads, and you don't have to keep your nose pointed at the target (which makes you more vulnerable to ground fire) for as long.

Spotting the mission goal targets can be difficult, but they shouldn't necessarily be your priority anyway. You'll almost always have wingmen flying with you, and they know the proper targets to hit. Instead, your first priority should usually be taking out any antiaircraft emplacements, which will give the others in your flight a better chance of taking out the mission targets. Then you can come back and take out any stragglers after you've eliminated the AA threat.

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I Was a Female Beastlord

Jeff's grand adventures in online transgender role-playing **By Jeff Green**

I have a confession to make. And though it pains me to do this, knowing the repercussions it may have on my life, it comes as a relief. Because I can no longer live the lie. I must be free. Free to live the life I want. Free to be me. So that is why I stand here today to say that for the last month, I have been playing computer games online...as a woman.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that I don lipstick and a wig and sit in front of my PC in frilly female underthings. I only did that once.

No, what I mean to say is that while gaming online, my persona, my character that interacts with other players, has been female. Let me tell you, it has been a real eye-opener. Until I became a woman this month, I never knew how much inequality there was in the world. I never knew how easy women had it.

***

My great transgender awakening began, innocently enough, when I started working on the review of *EverQuest: Shadows of Luclin*. I created a new character, a Vah Shir beastlord named Sasaphras, and tweaked the stats until they were just right. The one thing I forgot to check, oddly enough, was my gender. Looking now at Sasaphras' rather healthy set of lungs and overall babeliciousness (if I do say so myself), I admit it's a little hard to believe. But it's true. When I entered *Luclin* for the first time, I really thought I was doing so as a male.

These guys thought I was a *girl*! They were *flirting* with me!

It took only about 10 minutes online, however, to realize that something was wrong. As soon as I began wandering around, guys started talking to me.

"Hey Sasaphras, you need any armor?" some guy asked.

"Hey, Sas! You wanna group?" asked another guy.

As a longtime *EQ* player, I've known the community to be friendly, but never this friendly. One guy in particular latched onto me and helped me complete an entire newbie quest, for a full hour. "Man," I kept typing, "you should win some kind of Good Samaritan award."

"No problem," he'd reply. "It's my pleasure."

His pleasure? WTF? Okay—nobody is *that* nice. Something was wrong here.

***

Later that day, I finally got a good look at myself, and I had my answer. I was horrified. My gut reaction was to delete the character immediately, out of shame. Those guys thought I was a *girl*! They were *flirting* with me!

Once the initial shock passed, however, I began to think twice. In just two hours, I had completed an entire quest and received a bunch of great armor and weapons that I never could have afforded on my own. And that was without even *knowing* I was female. What if I went back in and actually played it up, and flirted *back* with all those losers? Think of all the phat lewt awaiting me!

So I did. And it worked. Big time. Sasaphras is now level 13 as I write this, and I've hardly had to buy a thing myself. Everybody wants to give me stuff. I never have to worry about getting healed or buffed, because there's always some chivalrous guy around to help me. And I have no trouble joining groups now, because, hey, I'm hot. Traveling the moon of Luclin is a lot less boring when you're running behind a female beastlord with curves like mine.

Of course, there is a down side. The endless, pedestrian comments about my looks. The condescending offers of assistance when I clearly don't need it. The refusal to take my advice about anything. Sometimes I get so annoyed that I avoid male characters altogether and just look for other females to group with. Sure the guys are great to have around when I need free stuff, but sometimes, well, sisters just gotta stick together.

"Aren't these guys annoying?" I'll type.

"Yeah," my female friend will respond.

"Uh...that's some pretty cool armor you're wearing."

"Yeah, you too."

Two empowered women sharing a moment? Or two slovenly, Dorito-breathed male gamers pretending to share a moment? I don't know, and I don't wanna know.

Jeff Green's a brick house. He's mighty mighty. He's letting it all hang out at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL SLACK

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